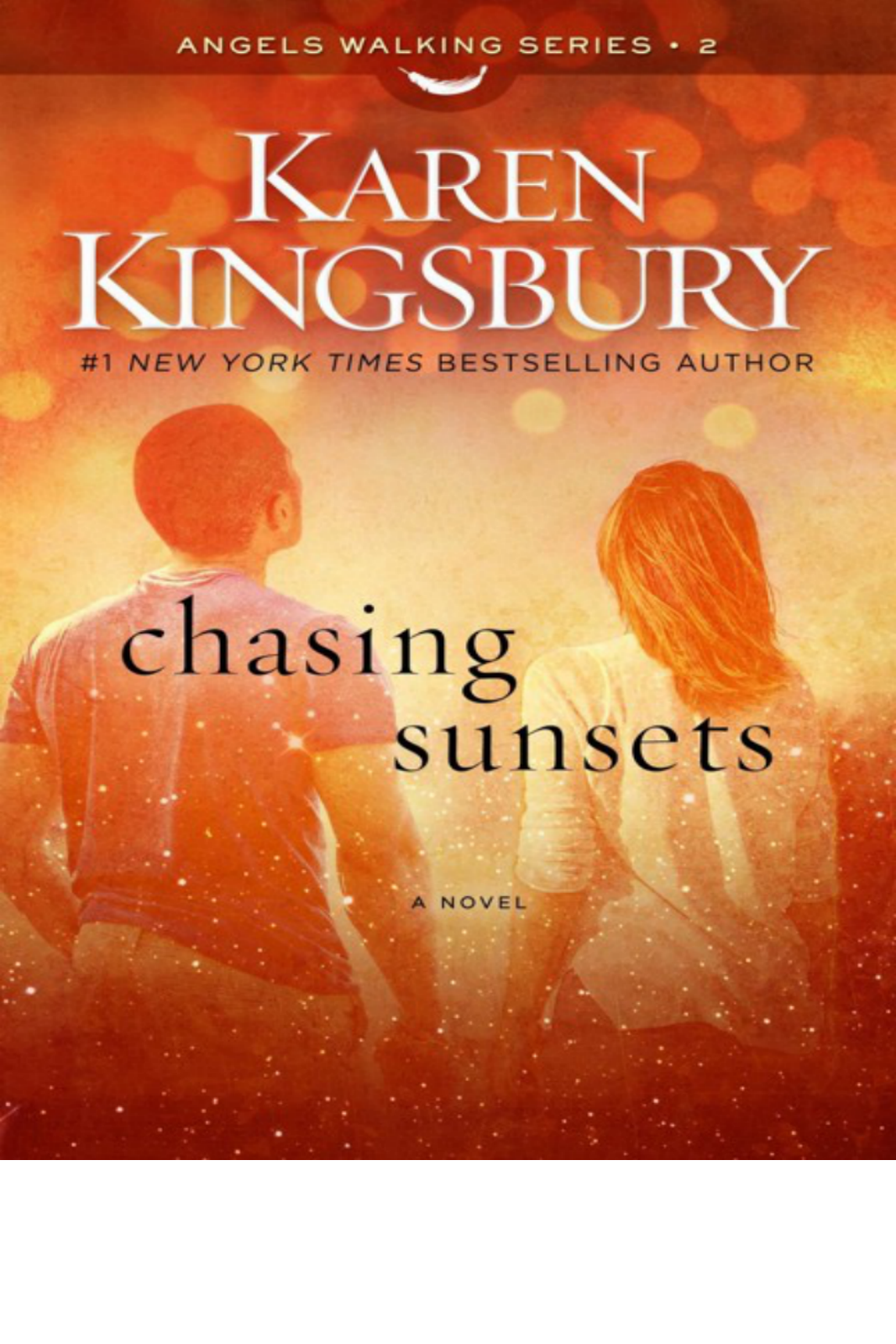


ANGELS WALKING SERIES • 2



KAREN KINGSBURY

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



chasing sunsets

A NOVEL

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Dear Reader Friend,

Forever in Fiction

Reading Group Guide
More Life-Changing Fiction™ by Karen Kingsbury

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A romantic scene of a man and a woman seen from behind, looking out at a sunset. The man is on the left, wearing a light-colored t-shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a light-colored top. The background is a warm, orange-hued sky with soft, out-of-focus light spots, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is romantic and serene.

chasing sunset

A NOVEL



Dans van die *Engele*



KAREN
KINGSBURY

TOPVERKOPERSKRYWER VAN *DIE BRUG* EN *DIE KANS*

Dedication

To Donald:

Well, my love, the nest isn't empty just yet, but it's getting there. The years have picked up speed and now most of our boys are out of the house and caught up in the wonder of college at Liberty University. Kelsey has been married to her wonderful Kyle for nearly three years and Tyler is about to graduate from college. Where in the world has the time gone? Wasn't it just yesterday that we were taking the kids to the zoo for a Super Surprise Saturday? Or bringing home three wide-eyed orphans from Haiti? So much laughter, so much fun, and always you at the center, leading the way. I remember once writing down the ages the kids would be as the years ahead unfolded. The years sounded almost futuristic—2014, 2015, 2016. A million miles away from my comfortable place at the turn of the century. I would try to imagine life without the noise and homework and music and childlike laughter. Life without six sports and theater and dance schedules to somehow balance. I couldn't picture it. But now that we're here I can see something I didn't see back then. I see you, my love, ever so much more clearly. You and me, holding hands and having more and more time together, the two of us rejoicing over the goodness of God, the faithfulness of Him. The lesson we're learning is this: It's all wonderful. Every amazing season back then and now and yet to come. It's been said the best is yet to be. And so it is, especially with you by my side. Let's play and laugh and sing and dance, and together we'll watch our children take wing. The ride is breathtakingly wondrous. I pray it lasts far into our twilight years. Until then, I'll enjoy not always knowing where I end and you begin. I love you always and forever.

To Kyle:

Kyle, our newest son, who so beautifully leads and loves our only daughter. I think of Don and me, standing on the beach in Mexico on the last day of our honeymoon, praying for the next generation—kids that God might bless us with and their future spouses. That day as we prayed on the beach, thousands of miles away, you were born. While we were praying. Amazing how God works out His plan and how faithful He is to answer prayers. Kyle, your heart is beautiful in every way. You cherish simple moments and are kind beyond words. You see the good in people and situations and you find a way to give God glory always. Your music is taking wing and now everyone knows about Kyle Kupecky and your gift of singing for Jesus. God is doing such great things with you and Kelsey and your ministries, your love for people. I thank God for you and look forward to the beautiful seasons ahead. Love you

always!

To Kelsey:

My precious daughter, how wonderful that our dream of making a mother-daughter card and gift line has come true. Possibilities by DaySpring/Hallmark is now in stores everywhere . . . and we are hearing such beautiful things about how this line is bringing people closer. It's all just a dream come true—something I couldn't have seen coming. But God did . . . and He continues to surprise us, doesn't He? Also, I'm so happy for you and Kyle. Your first book comes out soon and girls everywhere will want to read *The Chase: When God Writes Your Fairytale*. I pray it will change the hearts of this generation. I've never known you to be so happy, and time and again I point to you and Kyle as proof of God's faithfulness. Now, as you two move into the future God has for you, as you follow your dreams and shine brightly for Him in all you do, we will be here for you both, praying for you, believing in you, and supporting you however we best can. In the meantime, you'll be in my heart every moment. I love you, sweetheart.

To Tyler:

It's hard to believe you're so close to college graduation. The time has moved along faster every year and now here we are . . . knocking on the door of all that is ahead. All that God is still revealing to you. I'm so proud of the lead roles you've had in your college musicals. To think your papa told you he could see you as Tony from *West Side Story* one day . . . and that this past year you were Tony—it's further proof of God's love. But most of all I am proud of the example you have been to your friends—day in, day out. People around you are stronger because of you, and they are closer to God because of your example. I love that most of all about you, Ty. I'm so excited about your future. You are such a talented screenwriter, songwriter, director. One day the whole world will know! However your dreams unfold, we'll be in the front row cheering. Hold on to Jesus, son. Keep shining for Him! I love you.

To Sean:

You're finishing your first year at Liberty University with the dream of playing football. No one has worked for it harder than you, and we're so proud of your effort. But more than that, we are proud you want to be at a school that puts God first. In every sense of the word. He has such great plans for you. Sean, you've always had the best attitude, and now—even when there are hard days—you've kept that great attitude. Be joyful, God tells us. Be honest. Be a man of character. Keep working, keep pushing, keep believing.

Go to bed every night knowing you did all you could to prepare yourself for the doors God will open in the days ahead. You're a precious gift, son. I love you. Keep smiling and keep seeking God's best.

To Josh:

What changes you've gone through in the last year. You're at Liberty University now, working on becoming a champion for Christ! Whether on the football field or soccer field, you play with everything in you, leaving everything you have in the moments between the whistles. I'm so proud of you! This we know: there remains a very real possibility that you'll play competitive sports at the next level. God is going to use you for great things, and I believe He will put you on a public platform to do it. Stay strong in Him, and listen to His quiet whispers so you'll know which direction to turn. I'm so proud of you, son. I'll forever be cheering on the sidelines. Keep God first in your life. I love you always.

To EJ:

EJ, it's hard to believe you're finishing up your first year at Liberty University! As you continue to walk into this new season, I'm so glad you know just how much we love you and how deeply we believe in the great plans God has for you. With new opportunities spread out before you, keep your eyes on Jesus and you'll always be as full of possibility as you are today. I expect great things from you, and I know the Lord expects that, too. I'm so glad you're in our family—always and forever. Thanks for your giving heart, EJ. I love you more than you know.

To Austin:

Austin, what changes God has brought about in your life this past year. First the devastating blow that you could no longer play football, that you would never suit up for your junior year or ever again, for that matter. The heart defect you were born with finally caught up with you in ways we didn't see coming. And though you are so very healthy, as the doctor told you that very sad day, his job is to keep you alive. And so we have watched you cry and call out to God, but also we have watched you embrace this next stage of life like a quarterback, fourth and twelve. Like everything about tomorrow depends on it. We've always known there's no quit in you, and now we can see that happening. God has great plans for you still, son. What they are? Well, that's still taking shape and it has all of us more excited than ever! God saved you at birth and again when you gave your life to Jesus. Now He has saved you a third time by taking you off that field before the unthinkable might've

happened. Whatever He has ahead, I pray you will change the world for the better. I am completely convinced. But through it all I pray you remember you are only as strong as your dependence on Jesus. Only as brave as your tenacious grip on His truth. Your story is a series of miracles and this next chapter will be more of the same. Along the way, your dad and I will be in the front row cheering you on—whatever you play. Whatever you do. Sky's the limit, Aus. The dream is yours to take. I thank God for you, for the miracle of your life. I love you, Austin.

And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

Opgedra aan:

~

Aan Donald:

My lief, die nes is nog nie leeg nie, maar dit gaan nie meer lank wees nie ... Die jare gaan al vinniger verby en die meeste van ons seuns is nou uit die huis en geniet die studentelee by Libertyuniversiteit. Kelsey is nou al byna drie jaar met haar wonderlike Kyle getroud en Tyler se universiteitsdae begin eersdaags. Waar op aarde het die tyd heen gevlieg? Dit voel soos gister toe ons die kinders dieretuin toe geneem het vir 'n Groot Verrassing-Saterdag! Of toe ons ons drie grootoogwesies van Haiti af gebring het. Daar was altyd so baie lag en pret, en jy was altyd die middelpunt en die voorpunt daarvan. Ek onthou nog hoe ek eenkeer die kinders se ouderdomme neergeskryf het soos die jare sou aanstap. Die jare het so futuristies geklink: 2014, 2015, 2016. Miljoene kilometers weg van my gerieflike plek by die aanbreek van die nuwe eeu. Ek het my probeer voorstel hoe die lewe sou wees sonder geraas en huiswerk en musiek en kindergelag. Die lewe sonder ses mense se sport-, teater- en dansprogramme om te onthou en te sinchroniseer. Ek kon my dit glad nie voorstel nie. Maar nou is ons daar en ek sien iets wat ek toe nie besef het nie. Ek sien jou, my lief, baie duideliker. Ons twee wat hande vashou en baie meer tyd saam het, ons twee wat bly is oor God se goedheid en getrouheid. Die les wat ons besig is om te leer, is dat alles wonderlik is. Elke wonderlike seisoen van die verlede en die hede en die toekoms. Hulle sê altyd die beste kom nog. En ek glo dit is waar, veral met jou aan my sy. Kom ons speel en lag en sing en dans, en kyk saam hoe ons kinders hul voete as volwassenes vind. Hierdie ervaring is asemrowend wonderlik. Ek bid dat dit

tot diep in ons oudag so sal bly. En tot dan sal dit vir my lekker wees om nie altyd te weet waar ek ophou en jy begin nie. Ek sal altyd vir jou lief bly.

Aan Kyle:

Kyle, jy is ons nuutste seun, die een wat ons dogter liefhet en lei. Ek dink nou aan die dag toe ek en Don aan die einde van ons wittebrood op 'n strand in Meksiko gestaan en vir die volgende geslag gebid het – die kinders waarmee God ons moontlik sou seën, en ook vir hul lewensmaats. Op daardie dag, toe ons op die strand gestaan het, is jy duisende myle daarvandaan gebore. Terwyl ons gebid het. God se plan is wonderlik, en ook sy getroue beantwoording van ons gebede. Kyle, jy het so 'n mooi hart, in elke opsig: Jy waardeur eenvoudige oomblikke en is buitengewoon goedgehartig. Jy sien die goeie in mense en situasies en vind altyd 'n manier om God te eer. Jou musiek is besig om bekend te raak: Almal weet al van Kyle Kupecky en sy gawe om vir Jesus te sing. Die Here doen groot dinge met jou en Kelsey, jul bedienings en jul liefde vir mense.

Ek dank God vir jou en ek sien uit na 'n mooi toekoms. Ek sal altyd lief wees vir jou!

Aan Kelsey:

My kosbare dogter, dis wonderlik dat ons droom van 'n reeks madogterkaartjies en -geskenke besig is om waar te word. *PossibilitiesTM* deur Dayspring/Hallmark is al oral in winkels beskikbaar ... en ons hoor mooi dinge van hoe dit mense nader aan mekaar bring. Dit is 'n droom wat waar geword het – iets wat ek nooit voorsien het nie. Maar God het ... en Hy verras ons steeds, nie waar nie? Ek is ook so bly om jou en Kyle se onthalwe. Jul eerste boek gaan een van die dae verskyn en meisies sal almal *The chase – when God writes your fairytale* wil lees. Ek bid dat dit die harte van hierdie generasie sal verander. Jy is gelukkiger as ooit en jy en Kyle is vir my 'n duidelike getuigenis van God se getrouheid. En waar julle nou die toekoms wat God vir julle beplan het tegemoet gaan, en jul drome najaag en Hom eer in alles wat julle doen, sal ons vir julle bid, in julle glo en julle na die beste van ons vermoë ondersteun. Intussen is jy elke oomblik in my hart. Ek is lief jou, my skat.

Aan Tyler:

Dis moeilik om te glo dat jou universiteitsdae voor die deur staan. Die tyd het elke jaar vinniger verbygegaan en nou is ons hier ... en jou toekoms is voor die deur. Ook alles wat God nog aan jou sal openbaar. Ek is trots op die hoofrolle wat jy in die kollege se vertonings gespeel het. Om te dink Pappa het destyds gesê hy sien jou as Tony in *West Side story*, en vanjaar was jy sowaar Tony! Dit is net nog 'n bewys van God se liefde. Maar ek is veral trots op die voorbeeld wat jy elke dag vir jou vriende stel. Die mense om jou is

sterker omdat jy daar is en hulle is nader aan God danksy jou voorbeeld. Dit maak my hart warm, Ty. Ek is baie opgewonde oor jou toekoms. Jy is so 'n talentvolle draaiboekskrywer, liedjieskrywer en regisseur. Die hele wêreld sal dit eendag weet! Hoe jou drome ook al ontvou, ons sal in die voorste ry sit en hande klap! Hou vas aan Jesus, my seun. Laat jou lig vir Hom skyn. Ek is lief vir jou.

Aan Sean:

Jy maak vanjaar klaar met jou eerste jaar by Liberty-universiteit en jy droom daarvan om voetbal te speel. Niemand het harder daaraan gewerk as jy nie en ons is trots op jou harde werk! Maar ons is nog trotser op die feit dat jy by 'n universiteit wil wees waar God eerste kom. In elke opsig. Hy het groot planne vir jou, Sean. Jy het nog altyd 'n wonderlike uitkyk op die lewe gehad en jy behou dit selfs in donker tye. God sê ons moet altyd bly wees. Wees ook altyd eerlik. Wees 'n man van inbors. Hou aan werk, hou aan strewes, hou aan glo. Maak jou oë elke aand toe in die wete dat jy alles in jou vermoë gedoen het om jou gereed te maak vir die deure wat God op jou pad vorentoe sal oopmaak. Jy is 'n wonderlike gawe aan ons, my seun. Ek is lief vir jou. Hou aan glimlag en hou aan soek na God se meesterplan vir jou.

Aan Josh:

Jy het omtrent baie veranderings in die afgelope jaar beleef. Jy is nou by Liberty-universiteit en jy strewes daarna om 'n kampioen vir Christus te word. Jy speel altyd jou hart uit, of dit nou op die voetbalveld of die sokkerveld is. Ek is so trots op jou! Ons weet dat daar 'n groot moontlikheid bestaan dat jy na die volgende vlak van kompeterende sport sal vorder. God gaan jou vir groot dinge gebruik, en ek glo Hy sal jou 'n openbare verhoog daarvoor gee. Wees sterk in Hom en luister na sy sagte stem sodat jy kan weet op watter pad jy moet loop. Ek is baie trots op jou, my seun. Ek sal jou altyd van die kantlyn af toejuig. Maak seker dat God altyd eerste in jou lewe kom. Ek sal altyd lief wees vir jou.

Aan EJ:

EJ, dis moeilik om te glo jou eerste jaar by Liberty-universiteit is amper verby. Ek is bly dat jy weet hoe lief ons jou het en hoe vas ons glo dat God groot planne vir jou het wanneer jy jou toekoms tegemoet gaan. Jy het baie nuwe geleenthede; hou jou oog gevestig op Jesus, want dan sal daar altyd vir jou baie moontlikhede wees. Ek verwag groot dinge van jou en ek weet die Here verwag dit ook. Ek is bly jy is deel van ons gesin, vir altyd. Dankie vir jou groot hart, EJ. Ek is liewer vir jou as wat jy sal weet.

Aan Austin:

Austin, die Here het die afgelope jaar groot veranderings in jou lewe teweeggebring. Eers die verskriklike slag dat jy nie meer voetbal kan speel

nie, nie in graad 11 nie en ook nie vorentoe nie. Die hartdefek waarmee jy gebore is, het jou uiteindelik ingehaal, op maniere wat ons nie voorsien het nie. En alhoewel jy baie gesond is, is die dokter se werk steeds (soos hy gesê het) om jou aan die lewe te hou. Ons het gesien hoe jy treur en na God roep, maar ook hoe jy die volgende stadium van jou lewe soos 'n ware agterspeler tegemoet gehardloop het: asof alles omtrent die toekoms daarvan afhang. Ek het nog altyd geweet jy is 'n vasbyter, en ek sien nou dat ek reg was. God het nog steeds groot planne vir jou, my seun. Wat dit is? Wel, dit neem nog vorm aan en ons is almal baie opgewonde daaroor! God het jou lewe gered toe jy gebore is, en weer toe jy jou lewe vir Jesus gegee het. En nou het Hy jou lewe 'n derde keer gered deur jou van die voetbalveld te verwyder voordat 'n tragedie kon gebeur. Ons weet nie wat Hy vir jou beplan nie, maar my gebed is dat jy die wêreld 'n beter plek sal maak. Ek is oortuig daarvan dat jy dit sal doen. Maar bowenal bid ek dat jy jou krag altyd in jou afhanklikheid van Jesus sal vind, jou moed in jou greep op sy waarheid. Jou verhaal is 'n reeks wonderwerke en die volgende hoofstuk sal sekerlik nog wonderwerke bevat. En ek en Pappa sal in die voorste ry wees om jou toe te juig, wat jy ook al doen. Die moontlikhede is eindeloos, Aus. Gryp jou droom! Ek dank God vir jou, vir die wonderwerk van jou lewe. Ek is lief vir jou, Austin.

En aan God Almagtig, die Outeur van lewe, wat my – tot nou toe – met hierdie mense geseën het.

Prologue



Town Meeting—Heaven

JAG WAS GOING TO volunteer.

He had decided long before he walked into the meeting. It had only been a matter of convincing his still-broken heart. He moved into the room as the others took their seats. A spot at the back was still open. He slipped in and waited.

At the front, Orlon rose to face them. “You know why we’re here.” His voice sounded somber. “It’s time for the next part of our mission.” He set his shoulders back, strong, determined. “This time the task ahead is very serious. Life or death.”

Jag closed his eyes. The feel of the moment, the electricity and sense of expectation—all of it was familiar. Just like last time. *Am I wrong? Wrong to think I can make this journey when I failed last time?*

No answer whispered to him, but Jag knew what God would say. The Father had already told him after his last Angels Walking mission. What had happened, the tragedy of it all—it wasn’t Jag’s fault. Earth belonged to the ruler of the kingdom of the air. Darkness would often prevail among men.

Until the trumpets sounded. And the Father would defeat evil for all eternity.

But that truth didn’t lessen the weight of Jag’s decision this time around. He had been told he would work again, that the day would come when another Angels Walking mission would require his skills. The time was now. Jag was convinced.

He opened his eyes.

Orlon was explaining the situation. “This time our mission involves Marcus Dillinger, the pro baseball pitcher.”

Around the room the angels nodded. They had all shared a window to the work of the last Angels Walking team. The way Marcus Dillinger was used by God to bring his childhood friend Tyler Ames to Los Angeles.

“Marcus was MVP for the World Series win a few months ago.” Orlon smiled. “On earth this is a big deal.” His smile faded. “But now more than ever, Marcus is searching for meaning. Not only in life, but in love.”

Of course he is, Jag thought. *Man's trophies and titles, his fortune and fame, could never satisfy.* Deep in the depths of any human heart that much was understood. Chasing after such meaningless things resulted in emptiness every time.

Orlon went on. "Marcus is a good man. He will not let darkness satisfy the longing in his soul. He wants the plans of God. This will work in our favor." His voice fell. "Even when everything else in Marcus Dillinger's world will seem to work against us."

He explained that Tyler Ames and his longtime love, Sami Dawson, would be part of this mission, as would Mary Catherine—Sami's friend and roommate. "The success of this mission will come down to Mary Catherine." Orlon narrowed his eyes, his shoulders set. "Our team will work in the inner city of Los Angeles, where survival is key. I'll be clear with you. The enemy wants to cut short several lives—especially the lives of Marcus and Mary Catherine."

Orlon hesitated. "You remember the ultimate goal." It wasn't a question. Of course they remembered. All of heaven was mindful of the near-impossible goal for this angel team, the way each mission would require victory before the next could begin. How only at the end of these missions would they know if they were ultimately successful.

That success would come with the birth of a baby named Dallas Garner.

"As I've told you"—Orlon moved along the front of the room—"if the child is born, he will grow to be a very great evangelist, a teacher who will help turn the sons and daughters of Adam back to knowledge of truth and love. Back to a foundation of Scripture. Dallas will offer a revival, especially for the United States. A nation that once trusted and revered God."

Orlon had never looked more serious. "We have one successful mission behind us. We have several more ahead. But this one . . . this one will be dangerous for everyone involved. Even our team of Angels Walking."

The angels shifted in their places, as if the heaviness in the room had taken up residence on each of their shoulders. Jag felt it most of all. Angels were never in physical danger, of course. They were eternal. But they could lose a battle with man, and certainly they could be detained by the enemy. When Jacob of the Bible wrestled an angel, Jacob won. And when an angel was sent to Daniel in Babylon, the angel was prevented from his mission—blocked—by the prince of darkness.

Orlon checked the notes on his mahogany podium. "Michael tells me the baby has only a two percent chance of being born. The enemy has orchestrated a number of very dangerous circumstances. Health issues, relationship struggles, discouragement." He looked around the room again.

“Our Angels Walking team will be very busy.”

Jag ran his hand through his wavy blond hair and flexed his muscles. The tension in the room was building. It was time to choose the angels. Everyone could feel it.

“I need experience on this Angels Walking team. Veterans.” Orlon searched their faces. “Who would like to go?”

Jag didn’t hesitate. He rose to his full height. “I volunteer.”

Orlon paused but only for a moment. His eyes spoke volumes, for he knew Jag’s history, his heartbreaking past. “Jag.” A smile tugged at Orlon’s lips. “I was hoping you would consider this. It’s time.”

Once more Orlon looked around the room. “Who will take this Angels Walking mission with Jag?”

From the front of the room a willowy black angel rose from her seat. Her eyes shone like emeralds as she looked back at Jag and then at Orlon. “I volunteer.”

Aspyn.

If Jag could’ve chosen any angel in the room, he would’ve chosen her. The two of them had succeeded at a dangerous Angels Walking mission a hundred years ago in Germany. Aspyn was skilled at intervening in battle, practiced at working with people who lived angry, violent lives.

Orlon looked satisfied. He drew a deep breath. “Very well.” He motioned to the others. “Our job will be important also. We will watch and we will pray. Beginning now.”

In a rush the other angels surrounded them. And with that their voices rose to the Father on behalf of the mission ahead.

Never mind the danger. Jag had a decade of defeat to put to an end.

He was practically desperate to begin.

Proloog

Engelevergadering in die hemel

~

J

ag is van plan om aan te bied.

Hy het dit al lank voor die vergadering besluit. Dit was net dat hy eers sy gebroke hart moes oortuig. Hy kom die vertrek binne toe die ander al hul plekke begin inneem. Agter is daar nog ’n oop plek, en hy glip daar in. Hy

wag.

Orlon staan op en kyk na die engele. 'Julle weet hoekom julle hier is.' Sy stem klink somber. 'Dit is tyd vir die volgende deel van ons missie.' Hy strek sy skouers; hy is sterk, vasberade. 'Daar lê 'n groot taak vir julle voor. 'n Lewensbelangrike taak.'

Jag sluit sy oë. Wat hy voel, die elektrisiteit en afwagting, is vir hom bekend. Net soos die vorige keer. *Maak ek 'n fout? Is ek verkeerd om te dink ek kan hierdie taak aanpak as ek laas keer gefaal het?*

Hy hoor geen antwoord nie, maar hy weet wat God sou gesê het. Die Vader het dit trouens na sy vorige engele-missie gesê. Wat gebeur het, die tragedie, was nie sy skuld nie. Die aarde behoort aan die heerser van die koninkryk van die lug. Duisternis seëvier dikwels onder die mense.

Tot die dag van trompetgeskal. Dan sal die Vader die bose vir ewig oorwin.

Maar daardie waarheid verminder nie die gewigtigheid van Jag se besluit nie. Hy het gehoor dat hy weer sal werk, dat daar weer 'n engele-missie sal wees waar sy waardighede nodig word. En Jag voel seker dat daardie dag aangebreek het.

Hy maak sy oë oop.

Orlon is besig om die situasie te verduidelik. 'Ons missie het te doen met Marcus Dillinger, die professionele bofbalgooier.'

Die engele knik. Hulle het gesien wat met die vorige span op hul engele-missie gebeur het, en hoe God Marcus Dillinger gebruik het om sy skoolmaat Tyler Ames na Los Angeles te bring.

'Marcus was 'n paar maande gelede die Dodgers se *Waardevolste Speler* in die Wêreldreeks.' Orlon glimlag. 'Dis 'n groot ding op aarde.' Sy glimlag vervaag. 'Maar Marcus is dringend op soek na sin. Nie net in sy lewe nie, maar ook in sy verhoudings.'

Natuurlik, dink Jag. *Al die trofeë, titels, fortuin en roem op aarde kan 'n mens nie bevredig nie.* En die mens weet dit diep in sy hart. Die najaag van sinlose dinge lei elke keer tot 'n gevoel van leegheid.

Orlon praat verder. 'Marcus is 'n goeie mens. Hy laat nie toe dat die duisternis die verlange in sy gees bevredig nie. Hy soek God se plan vir sy lewe. Dit tel in ons guns.' Sy erns is duidelik in sy stemtoon, 'Maar dit gaan lyk asof alles in Marcus Dillinger se wêreld teen ons werk.'

Hy verduidelik dat Tyler Ames en sy skoolliefde, Sami Davidson, deel van die sending gaan wees, asook Mary Catherine, Sami se vriendin en woonstelmaat. 'Die sukses van die missie sal van Mary Catherine afhang.' Orlon se oë vernou en hy strek weer sy skouers. 'Ons span sal in Los Angeles se middestad werk, waar alles om oorlewing draai. Ek sal nie doekies omdraai nie. Die vyand wil verskeie mense se lewe beëindig, veral dié van Marcus en

Mary Catherine.’

Orlon huiwer effens. ‘Julle weet wat ons uiteindelijke doelwit is.’ Dit is nie ’n vraag nie. Natuurlik weet hulle. Die hemel is bewus van die bykans onmoontlike doelwit van hierdie engelespan, en ook dat elke missie eers ’n oorwinning moet behaal voordat die volgende een kan begin. En dat hulle net aan die einde van al die sendings sal weet of hulle wel geseëvier het.

Dit sal gebeur wanneer ’n baba met die naam Dallas Garner gebore word.

‘Soos ek gesê het,’ sê Orlon en stap stadig heen en weer voor die wagtende engele, ‘as die kind gebore word, sal hy as volwassene ’n belangrike evangelis wees, ’n leraar wat die seuns en dogters van Adam terug sal bring na die kennis van waarheid en liefde. Terug na die fondament van die Skrif. Dallas sal ’n herlewing bring, veral in die VSA, ’n nasie wat eens op ’n tyd op God vertrou het en Hom geëer het.’

Orlon lyk nog meer ernstig. ‘Ons het een suksesvolle sending agter die rug. Daar lê verskeie sendings voor. Maar hierdie een ... hierdie een sal gevaarlik wees vir al die betrokkenes. Selfs vir die engelespan.’

Die engele skuif rond, asof die swaar gevoel in die vertrek op hul skouers kom lê het. Jag voel dit die meeste van almal. Engele is natuurlik nooit op fisieke vlak in gevaar nie. Hulle is ewig. Maar hulle kan ’n stryd teen ’n mens verloor, en hulle kan beslis deur die vyand vertrap word. Toe Jakob destyds met ’n engel geworstel het, het Jakob gewen. En toe ’n engel na Daniël in Babel gestuur is, is die engel vertrap – teruggehou.

Orlon kyk na sy notas op die mahonie-kateder. ‘Migael sê daar is net ’n tweepersentkans dat die baba gebore sal word. Die vyand het ’n reeks omstandighede georkestreer wat hierdie geboorte bykans onmoontlik maak. Gesondheidsprobleme, verhoudingsprobleme, moedeloosheid.’ Hy kyk weer in die vertrek rond. ‘Die span op hierdie engele-missie sal baie besig wees.’

Jag vee met sy hand deur sy blonde krulhare en span sy spiere. Die spanning is aan die opbou in die vertrek. Dis tyd om die engele te kies. Almal voel dit aan.

‘Ek het ervare engele vir hierdie missie nodig. Veterane.’ Orlon deursoek die gesigte voor hom. ‘Wie is gewillig om te gaan?’

Jag huiwer nie ’n oomblik nie. Hy staan op. ‘Ek bied aan.’

Orlon huiwer, maar net vir ’n oomblik. Sy oë spreek boekdele, want hy ken Jag se geskiedenis, sy hartverskeurende verlede. ‘Jag.’ Daar is ’n glimlag om sy lippe. ‘Ek het gehoop jy sal dit oorweeg. Die tyd is reg.’

Orlon kyk weer deur die vertrek. ‘Wie sal saam met Jag op hierdie engele-missie gaan?’

’n Slanke swart engel staan uit een van die voorste stoele op. ‘Ek bied aan.’

Aspyn.

As Jag enige engel in die vertrek kon kies, sou dit sy gewees het. Hulle twee het 'n honderd jaar gelede 'n suksesvolle missie in Duitsland voltooi. Aspyn het uitstekende vaardighede wanneer daar by 'n geveg tussenbeide getree moet word. Sy vaar ook goed met mense wat vol woede is en gewelddadige lewens ly.

Orlon lyk tevrede. Hy haal diep asem. 'Goed.' Hy beduie na die ander engele. 'Ons werk is ook baie belangrik. Ons sal waak en bid, en dadelik daarmee begin.'

Met 'n gedruis kom staan die engele om Jag en Aspyn, en bid tot die Vader vir die sending wat vir die twee engele voorlê.

Jag dink nie aan die gevaar op hande nie. Hy moet 'n dekade van neerlae tot 'n einde bring.

Hy kan nie wag om te begin nie.

1



THE JANUARY SUNSHINE CAST an array of shimmering diamonds across the Pacific Ocean that early morning as Mary Catherine kicked off her sandals and headed for the water.

"We'll freeze. Even with our wetsuits." Sami Dawson, her best friend and roommate, was right behind her, laughing at the insanity of their decision.

"Only for a few minutes." Mary Catherine's long golden red hair was caught up in a ponytail and it flew behind her as she ran. She was laughing, too, but more because she loved starting her Saturday like this. "Once we're in we won't feel a thing."

They carried their boogie boards as they ran through the shallow surf and then jumped over the frigid foamy breakers. In no time they were in up to their shoulders, past the foam and ready to ride the next set of waves.

Mary Catherine shook the water from her hair, breathless. "See? It isn't terrible!"

"Sure." Sami shivered. She nodded to the wave headed their way. "Come on. Keep moving."

They caught the first one and rode it all the way to shore. The spray of cool seawater in their faces, the rush of the powerful ocean beneath them. Mary

Catherine loved everything about this. She felt alive and whole and connected to God. A thrilling diversion from the news she'd received last week.

The news that her heart didn't have long.

Sometime today she would tell Sami the truth about her health, come clean about the things she'd been hiding. But for now she would enjoy this moment. And she would remember what her mother told her years ago. Life could never be measured in the number of days a person lived, but only by the beautiful, brilliant life that had colored those days.

Mary Catherine paddled back out alongside Sami. Her friend's eyes were wide. "I think I saw a dolphin." She pointed behind the waves. "Like fifteen feet that way."

Mary Catherine scanned the distant water. "I hope it wasn't a shark."

"What?" Sami let out a quiet scream. "Don't say that!"

"I'm kidding." Mary Catherine laughed again. "I saw it, too. A few of them. Definitely dolphins."

Another swell came and again they caught the ride all the way in. They took their boards and sat on the wet sand, trying to catch their breath. Sami shook her shoulder-length dark hair. "Thank you for making me do this. I'm not cold."

"It's perfect out here." Mary Catherine headed back out. "Come on. A few more."

They pushed through the white surf to the smooth area and waited. Sami wiped the water from her face. "I can't wait for tonight. I really think Marcus is onto something with this youth center."

"Me, too. I'm glad we're going early." Mary Catherine felt it, the way she always did at the mention of Marcus's name. A feeling that started in her heart and made its way down her arms and up the back of her neck. She hated the reaction. The last thing she needed was a crush on Marcus Dillinger. "Is he still dating his coach's niece?"

"He is. We're double-dating with them next week." Sami wrinkled her nose. "I don't think they're a good match." She shrugged. "I don't see it."

Between her heart condition and half a dozen charities she was involved with, Mary Catherine certainly had no time to worry about a professional baseball player. The guy could never be her type.

They rode a few more waves and then Mary Catherine nodded to the shore. "Let's dry off."

"Good idea. I still have to do laundry before we meet up with the guys."

Their towels were ten yards up the beach, and after a few minutes they pulled on sweats and sat on the sand facing the water. Mary Catherine turned her face to the winter sun and savored the way it melted through her. How

could anything be wrong with her heart? She felt too good to be sick.

The quiet suited them. Since rooming together a few years ago they'd had the sort of friendship that could erupt into laughter or feel comfortable in complete silence. They were very different, she and Sami. Mary Catherine broke the silence. "Did you and Tyler have fun last night?"

"We did." Sami's smile lit up her face more than the morning sun ever could. "I can't believe how good things are. I think he's going to ask me to be his girlfriend. Officially."

Mary Catherine jumped to her feet. "Really?" She danced around in a circle. "Yes!" She raised both fists in the air. "Yes, yes, yes!" Then just as quickly she dropped back to the beach. "What in the world is taking so long?"

"Well . . ." Sami shrugged, sheepish. "It's more me. Like I told you." This time her laugh sounded more nervous. "I needed time."

"Come on." Mary Catherine leaned back on her hands and grinned at her friend. "You've been in love with him since you were in high school."

"But I was practically engaged to Arnie." Sami's tone held a mock protest, nothing serious. After a few seconds she burst into the sort of laughter she and Mary Catherine shared so often. "Okay, okay! You're right. I don't need much more time."

"Oh, come on." Mary Catherine leaned forward and crossed her legs. "How long before he'll ask you to marry him?"

"Seriously?" Sami looked shocked. "Let's not rush things!"

"It won't be long." Mary Catherine raised her eyebrows. "You heard it from me first."

"You're crazy."

"But in this case, also right." Mary Catherine let her silliness fade, let the breeze off the ocean frame the moment, the significance of it. "Was it beautiful? Your date?"

"It was. We were at Disneyland, as you know." She looked so much happier than before, back when she was dating Arnie. "When it was dark he took me to the bridge in front of Sleeping Beauty's castle." Sami was sitting cross-legged now, facing Mary Catherine. "He told me he never stopped adoring me, never stopped thinking about me. Even with every bad decision he made back then."

"That's sweet."

Sami's smile held a contentment that hadn't been there in the beginning, back when Tyler first returned to Los Angeles. "He says he has just one regret now. One that still haunts him." She paused and lifted her face toward the sun for a few seconds before looking back at Mary Catherine. "That he ever left me at all."

The story touched Mary Catherine. She couldn't be happier for her friend, for the love she'd found. "I want to be maid of honor." She held up both hands in a teasing surrender. "That's all I'm saying."

"Seriously, though . . . you could be right." Again Sami's joy was tangible. "I love him so much. This new Tyler, the one with lessons learned and a faith that gets stronger every day . . . I just never dreamed we would have a second chance."

"I did." Mary Catherine gave Sami a knowing look. "Remember?"

"True." Sami's laugh mixed with the disbelief she still clearly felt. "You told me I couldn't leave Florida on that business trip, unless I spent a few hours with him."

"Let's just say I'm a very good friend." Mary Catherine grinned.

"Definitely maid of honor status."

The sun was higher in the sky, temperatures heating up. Mary Catherine allowed the silence again. She needed some kind of buffer before she could tell Sami the truth about her health. The one thing they'd never talked about. She checked her phone. Nearly eleven o'clock. They needed to be at the newly renovated youth center by three that afternoon to help with last-minute details for the grand opening.

Finally Mary Catherine shifted on her towel so she was facing Sami. "You ever wonder why I changed my eating habits lately? No more frozen pizza?"

Sami's smile came easily. "The whole no sugar, no gluten, no grain thing?" She uttered a quick laugh. "Because you're amazing and you like feeling good enough to climb walls and jump out of planes?" She laughed again. "That's what I always figured. I sure couldn't eat that clean."

Mary Catherine hated what was coming. She wanted everyone in her world to go on thinking she had switched up her eating because of her zest for life. Nothing more. She hesitated.

Finally Sami's laughter faded. "Isn't that why?"

"No." Mary Catherine's smile remained, but she could feel a sadness filling her eyes. "I'm diabetic. Type two."

"What?" Sami put her elbows on her knees and leaned closer. "Since when? How come you never told me?"

"I only found out last month, and my eating keeps it under control." She angled her head, willing her friend to understand. "I don't like thinking about it. Obviously. And, well, the way I eat I don't need pills or shots. I check my blood sugar every morning. So far, it's controlled."

Sami hesitated. "Okay, good. You scared me for a minute."

"There's more. Diabetes runs in our family." She paused. "Just like congenital heart defects. My uncle died because of his heart disease when he

was in his late twenties. My mom never had any problem, but the gene passed on to me.”

Again Sami looked beyond confused. She stared at Mary Catherine. “You’re saying . . . there’s something wrong with your heart?”

Mary Catherine took a slow breath. “I was born with a coarctation of the aorta, and a bicuspid aortic valve. I had emergency surgery when I was a few weeks old and since then I get checkups every year.” She forced her smile. “No big deal.”

“You should’ve said that first.” Sami looked like she wasn’t sure whether to relax or expect more news. “So . . . you’re okay? Like long-term?”

“Not really.” She hadn’t talked about this with anyone. Not even her parents. “I had a checkup last week. My heart’s enlarged—which isn’t good. And my valves are deteriorating. I’ll need a transplant sometime in the next year.”

Sami pulled her knees up to her chest and hung her head for several seconds. When she looked up, there was no mistaking the fear in her eyes. “What does that mean?”

“The valve transplant isn’t the worst thing. People survive those—though mine will be trickier for a lot of reasons.” Mary Catherine looked to the sky; the California sun filled the morning. “It’s my enlarged heart that’s the real problem. Even with a transplant I may not have more than ten years. Maybe less.”

The color left Sami’s face and she simply stared, like she couldn’t begin to believe the news. “That’s . . . awful.”

“You’re the only one who knows.” She reached out and gave Sami’s hand a brief squeeze. “You’re my best friend, Sami. I’ve been looking for a way to tell you.”

Sami hung her head for a long moment again. When she turned to Mary Catherine, there were tears in her eyes. “There must be something they can do. Your parents know the best doctors, right?”

“They do. But this . . . well, you can’t fix an enlarged heart like mine. There are drugs that can slow the process. But that’s about it.”

“I can’t believe this.” Sami stared at the sky. A minute passed before she lowered her arms and faced Mary Catherine again. Tears fell down her cheeks. “We have to find another opinion.”

“I’ve done that.” She looked straight into Sami’s eyes. “Look, the reason I’m telling you is so you’ll pray. God can do anything—even with this.” Again, she worked to keep discouragement from her voice. “That’s why I care so much about living. Why I’m always talking about only living once. Because I don’t have as long as most people.”

Sami wiped her tears with her fingertips. "It's not fair."

"It is." Mary Catherine sat up straighter. "God's given me all these years of life and probably many more. I still have lots to do—like get that youth center up and running tonight. And maybe move to Africa for a year and work with orphans."

"You always say that."

"I'll do it one of these days." Mary Catherine found her smile again. "Of course, I'll probably skydive another dozen times at least, and look." She turned her face toward the ocean again. "I have mornings like this, with you." She felt a familiar peace fill her soul. "God has been far more than fair with me."

"Are you in pain? I mean . . . like, does it make your chest hurt?"

"Not at all." She raised her hands and dropped them again. "I feel perfect."

"Good." Sami looked off, her expression marked with sorrow. "What about love?"

"What about it?" Mary Catherine felt her heart sink.

Sami stared at her. "You deserve love."

"No." She shook her head. "I won't have time." Mary Catherine felt tears sting her own eyes. "But I'm okay with that."

Sami looked into her eyes again. "You were going to find someone real, remember? Someone like you, with faith like you and a love for life like you." Sami shook her head. "That was supposed to be the miracle of your life." She exhaled hard. "I can't believe this."

"Sami . . . it's all right." Mary Catherine put her hand on her friend's shoulder. "God's going to give me a different kind of miracle." She stood and reached out her hand. "Come on. Let's go find those dolphins."

Sami waited several seconds before she took Mary Catherine's hand. "Really?" She shaded her eyes so she could see better. "Can you do this? Swimming in the ocean? Is that good for you?"

"It's all good." She slipped back into her wetsuit and ran a few steps ahead. "The more life in my days, the better. Then it doesn't matter how many days I have. Just that I really lived them."

"I hate this." Sami climbed into her wetsuit and caught up to her. "You're probably supposed to be home resting."

"Never." Mary Catherine grabbed her boogie board and ran through the surf. Her laughter mixed with the sound of the waves. "God wants me out here."

Sami paddled alongside her. The moment they reached the calm area before the swells, they spotted the dolphins. Three of them, playing in the water a few yards away.

“See!” Mary Catherine’s joy was as genuine as the sun on the water. “I don’t want to miss this.”

For the first time in many minutes, Sami smiled again. “I don’t know anyone like you, MC.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Mary Catherine looked over her shoulder as the perfect wave came straight for them. “Here we go!”

And with that they both caught the wave and started to ride it in. The moment they did, Mary Catherine spotted two of the dolphins riding alongside them. “Look!” she shouted.

Sami turned her head and saw what was happening just before the dolphins kicked out of the wave and headed back out to sea. “Wow!”

“That never happens!”

“So beautiful.” Sami was laughing now, too.

Mary Catherine turned her attention to the shore as the ride continued. Tears filled her eyes and mixed with salt water and a happiness that knew no limits. The heaviness from earlier was gone. No matter how many years she had or where God would lead her from here, one thing would always be true.

As long as she drew breath, she would spend her days living.

Hoofstuk 1

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D

ie sonskyn, warmer as gewoonlik vir ’n winteroggend in Januarie, laat die Stille Oseaan soos diamante blink. Mary Catherine skop haar plakkies uit en hardloop na die water toe.

‘Ons sal vries. Selfs in ons duikpakke.’ Sami Dawson, haar beste vriendin en woonstelmaat, is reg agter haar, dik van die lag oor hul mal voorneme.

‘Net vir ’n paar minute,’ Mary Catherine se lang, rooiblonde hare is vasgebind in ’n poniestert wat agter haar aan vlieg. Sy lag ook, want dit is hoe sy die graagste ’n Saterdagoggend wil begin. ‘As ons eers in die water is, sal ons niks voel nie.’

Hulle hardloop deur die vlak water, elkeen het haar lyfplank in die hand, en spring-spring oor die ysige, skuimende branders. En dan is hulle tot by hul skouers in die water, verby die skuim en gereed om die volgende brander te ry.

Mary Catherine skud die water uit haar hare, skoon uitasem. ‘Sien jy? Dis nie

so erg nie!’

‘S-s-seker,’ bibber Sami. Sy knik toe sy ’n brander sien aankom. ‘Kom aan. Ons moet aan die beweeg bly.’

Hulle vang die eerste brander en ry hom tot by die sand. Met koue seewater in hul gesigte en die stukrag van die oseaan agter hulle. Mary Catherine is mal hieroor. Dit laat haar lewendig en een met die Skepper voel. En dit is ’n gawe afleiding van die nuus wat sy die vorige week gehoor het.

Die nuus dat haar hart nie meer lank sal hou nie.

Sy wil Sami vandag nog vertel van haar gesondheid, al die dinge wat sy geheim gehou het. Mary Catherine roei saam met Sami terug die branders in. Haar vriendin se oë is soos pierings. ‘Ek dink ek het ’n dolfyn gesien.’ Sy wys agter die branders. ‘Hy was omtrent vyf meter ver.’

Mary Catherine kyk oor die water. ‘Ek hoop nie dis ’n haai nie.’

‘Wat!’ Sami gee ’n sagte gil. ‘Moenie so sê nie!’

‘Ek grap net!’ Mary Catherine lag weer. ‘Ek het dit ook gesien. Daar is ’n hele paar. Beslis dolfyne.’

Nog ’n brander kom aan en hulle ry weer die hele ent strand toe. Toe sit hulle met hul planke op die nat sand om asem te skep. Sami skud haar skouerlengte donker hare.

‘Dankie dat jy my omgepraat het. Ek kry glad nie koud nie.’

‘Ek dink hierdie plek is perfek.’ Mary Catherine staan op. ‘Kom ons gaan ry nog ’n paar keer.’

Hulle stoot deur die branders en wag in die stil water. Sami vee die water uit haar gesig. ‘Ek kan nie wag vir vanaand nie. Ek dink regtig Marcus het ’n idee beet met sy jeugsentrum.’

‘Ek ook. Ek is bly ons kan vroeg gaan.’ Mary Catherine voel dit weer, soos altyd as sy Marcus se naam hoor. ’n Gevoel wat in haar hart begin en dan al met haar arms af en in haar nek op beweeg. Sy pes dit. Die laaste ding wat sy nodig het, is om op Marcus Dillinger verlief te raak. ‘Neem hy nog die afrigter se niggie uit?’

‘Ja. Ons gaan weer later in die week saam met hulle uit.’ Sami trek haar neus op ’n plooi. ‘Ek dink nie hulle pas bymekaar nie.’ Sy trek haar skouers op. ‘Ek kan nie sien hoe dit kan werk nie.’

Met haar hartprobleem en al die liefdadigheidsorganisasies waarby sy betrokke is, het Mary Catherine beslis nie tyd om haar oor ’n professionele bofbalspeler te verkies nie. Hy is eenvoudig nie haar tipe nie.

Hulle ry nog ’n paar branders en toe wys Mary Catherine na die strand. ‘Kom ons gaan sit en droog word in die son.’

‘Goeie plan. Ek moet nog gaan wasgoed was voordat ons die ouens ontmoet.’

Hul handdoeke lê ’n ent weg teen die strand, en na ’n paar minute trek hulle

sweetpakke aan en sit en kyk na die water. Mary Catherine draai haar gesig na die son en geniet die streling op haar vel. Hoe kan daar iets met haar hart verkeerd wees? Sy voel te gesond om siek te wees.

Die twee meisies hou van die stilte. Vandat hulle 'n paar jaar gelede 'n woonstel begin deel het, raak hulle dikwels skielik uitbundig saam aan die lag, maar kan net so goed in 'n gemaklike stilte verval. Sy en Sami verskil soos dag en nag. Mary Catherine verbreek eerste die stilte. 'Het jy en Tyler jul aand geniet?'

'O ja.' Die glimlag op Sami se gesig laat haar straal, meer as wat die son kan regkry. 'Ek kan nie glo hoe goed dit met ons gaan nie. Ek dink hy gaan my vra om sy meisie te word. Amptelik.'

Mary Catherine spring op. 'Regtig?' Sy dans al in 'n kring. 'Ja!' Sy lig twee vuiste in die lug. 'Ja, ja, ja!' Dan val sy skielik langs Sami op die sand neer. 'Waarom op aarde wag hy so lank?'

'Wel ...' Sami trek haar skouers 'n bietjie verleë op. 'Dis eintlik ek. Ek het jou mos gesê.' Hierdie keer klink haar lag 'n bietjie senuagtig. 'Ek het tyd nodig gehad.'

'Jy speel!' Mary Catherine leun terug op haar hande en glimlag vir haar vriendin. 'Jy is al van jul hoërskooldae af verlief op hom!'

'Ja, maar ek was so te sê verloof aan Arnie,' Sami klink gemaak-ernstig. Na 'n paar sekondes bars sy uit in die soort lagbui wat sy en Mary Catherine so dikwels deel. 'Oukei, oukei, jy is reg. Ek het nie regtig meer tyd nodig nie.'

'Ag, dit maak nie saak nie.' Mary Catherine buig vorentoe en kruis haar bene. 'Hoe lank voor hy jou gaan vra om te trou?'

'Jy is nie ernstig nie!' Sami lyk geskok. 'Ons hoef nie oorhaastig te wees nie!' 'Een van die dae.' Mary Catherine lig haar wenkbroue. 'Jy het dit heel eerste by my gehoor!'

'Jy's mal!'

'Ja, maar in hierdie geval ook reg.' Mary Catherine laat vaar haar verspottigheid, en laat toe dat die seewind die oomblik, en die belangrikheid daarvan, omraam. 'Was dit mooi? Jul aand?'

'Ja. Ons was by Disneyland. Wel, jy weet dit.' Sy lyk baie gelukkiger as toe sy nog met Arnie uitgegaan het. 'Toe dit donker word, het hy my na die brug voor Aspoestertjie se kasteel geneem.' Sami sit nou kruisbeen voor Mary Catherine. 'Hy het gesê hy het nog nooit opgehou om lief te wees vir my nie, en dat hy nooit opgehou het om aan my te dink nie. Selfs met elke swak besluit wat hy destyds geneem het.'

'Dis mooi van hom.'

Sami se glimlag hou 'n tevredenheid in wat nie daar was voordat Tyler teruggekem het Los Angeles toe nie. 'Hy sê daar is net een ding waaroor hy

jammer is. Een wat nog by hom spook.’ Sy bly ’n rukkie stil en hou haar gesig vir ’n paar oomblikke na die son voordat sy weer na Mary Catherine kyk. ‘Dat hy ooit van my af weggegaan het.’

Die storie raak Mary Catherine diep. Sy voel gelukkig vir haar vriendin se onthalwe, dat sy liefde gevind het. ‘Ek wil jou strooimeisie wees.’ Sy hou haar hande laggend in die lug. ‘Dis al wat ek sal sê!’

‘Wel ... jy kan dalk reg wees.’ Sami se vreugde is tasbaar. ‘Ek is so lief vir hom. Hierdie nuwe Tyler, die een wat lewenslesse geleer het en wie se geloof elke dag sterker word. Ek het nooit gedink ons sal ’n tweede kans kry nie.’

Mary Catherine glimlag. ‘Ek het. Onthou jy?’

‘Dis waar.’ Die ongeloof wat sy nog steeds voel, klink in Sami se lag op. ‘Jy het gesê ek kan nie huis toe kom ná daardie sakereis Florida toe tensy ek ’n paar uur vir hom gaan kuier het nie.’

‘Kom ons sê net ek is ’n baie goeie vriendin!’ Mary Catherine glimlag ingenome.

‘Beslis strooimeisie-status!’

Die son het intussen hoër geklim, en dit is effens warmer. Mary Catherine laat die stilte toe om weer oor hulle te daal. Sy het ’n soort buffer nodig voordat sy vir Sami die waarheid oor haar gesondheid kan vertel. Dis die een ding waaroor hulle nog nooit gepraat het nie. Sy kyk na haar selfoon. Amper elfuur. Hulle moet teen drie-uur by die gerestoureerde jeugsentrum wees om met die laaste takies te help voor die groot openingseremonie.

Eindelik draai Mary Catherine op haar handdoek om sodat sy Sami in die oë kan kyk. ‘Het jy nog nie gewonder hoekom ek onlangs anders begin eet het nie? Geen bevrore pizza meer vir my nie?’

Sami glimlag lui. ‘Die hele ding van suikervry, glutenvry, koringvry?’ Sy lag vinnig. ‘Want jy is wonderlik en jy hou daarvan om supergesond te wees sodat jy teen mure kan uitklim en uit vliegtuie kan spring?’ Sy lag weer. ‘Dis wat ek gedink het. Ek kan verseker nie so gesond eet nie.’

Mary Catherine is nie lus vir wat nou gaan kom nie. Sy wil hê almal op aarde moet dink sy het haar eetgewoontes verander om meer lewenslus te hê. Niks meer nie. Sy huiwer.

Eindelik vervaag Sami se glimlag. ‘Is dit nie die rede nie?’

‘Nee.’ Mary Catherine hou aan glimlag, maar sy kan voel hoe haar oë hartseer word. ‘Ek is ’n diabeet. Tipe 2.’

‘Wat?’ Sami sit haar elmboë op haar knieë en skuif nader. ‘Van wanneer af? En hoekom het jy my nog nie gesê nie?’

‘Ek het eers laas maand uitgevind, en my dieet hou dit onder beheer.’ Sy draai haar kop skeef, asof sy haar vriendin wil dwing om te verstaan. ‘Ek dink nie graag daaraan nie. Natuurlik nie. En, wel, omdat ek reg eet, hoef ek nie

medisyne of insputings te kry nie. Ek toets elke oggend my bloed. En tot dusver is alles onder beheer.'

Sami huiwer. 'Dis goed so. Jy het my laat skrik!'

'Wel, dis nie al nie. Daar is diabetes in ons familie.' Sy bly 'n oomblik stil. 'En 'n aangebore hartdefek. My oom is aan 'n hartsiekte dood toe hy in sy laat twintigs was. My ma se hart is piekfyn, maar die geen het weer by my uitgeslaan.'

Sami lyk nou weer heeltemal verward. Sy staan na Mary Catherine. 'Wil jy vir my sê ... daar's fout met jou hart?'

Mary Catherine haal diep asem. 'Ek is gebore met 'n koarktase van die aorta, en ook 'n bikuspidale aorta-klep. Ek moes 'n noodoperasie ondergaan toe ek 'n paar weke oud was en sedertdien moet ek elke jaar 'n opvolgondersoek hê.' Sy dwing haarself om te glimlag. 'Dis nie so erg nie.'

'Jy moes dit heel eerste gesê het.' Sami kyk haar aan asof sy nie weet of sy kan ontspan of nog slegte nuus moet verwag nie. 'Jy is dus ... oukei? Soos in langtermyn?'

'Nie regtig nie.' Sy het nog nooit met enige iemand hieroor gesels nie, nie eens met haar ouers nie. 'Ek was laasweek by die dokter. My hart is vergroot – wat nie oukei is nie. En my kleppe is besig om agteruit te gaan. Ek sal binne 'n jaar 'n oorplanting moet kry.'

Sami trek haar knieë op en laat haar kop vir 'n paar sekondes daarop rus. Toe sy opkyk, kan 'n mens nie die vrees in haar oë miskyk nie. 'Wat beteken dit?'

'Die kleppoorplanting is nie die ergste nie. Mense oorleef dit – alhoewel myne om 'n paar redes 'n bietjie meer ingewikkeld as die meeste ander mense s'n sal wees.' Mary Catherine kyk weer op in die lug, na die Kaliforniese son wat vanoggend so helder skyn. 'Die eintlike probleem is my vergrote hart. Selfs met 'n oorplanting het ek moontlik net tien jaar van my lewe oor. Miskien minder.'

Sami word bleek en staan Mary Catherine aan asof sy haar nie naastenby kan glo nie. 'Dit is ... verskriklik.'

'Jy is die enigste een wat weet.' Sy steek haar hand uit en druk Sami se hand. 'Jy is my beste vriendin, Sami. Ek wou jou graag vertel, ek het net 'n manier gesoek om dit te doen.'

Sami laat haar kop vir 'n lang ruk sak. Toe sy weer na Mary Catherine kyk, is daar tranes in haar oë. 'Daar moet iets wees wat hulle kan doen. Jou ouers ken tog seker die beste dokters, dan nie?'

'O ja. Maar hierdie ding ... wel, hulle kan nie regtig iets doen aan 'n vergrote hart soos myne nie. Daar is medisyne wat die proses kan vertraag. Maar dit is omtrent al.'

'Ek glo dit nie.' Sami kyk op na die lug. 'n Minuut gaan verby voordat sy

weer haar arms laat sak en na Mary Catherine kyk. Die trane loop by haar wange af. 'Ons moet 'n tweede opinie kry.'

'Ek het al.' Sy kyk Sami in die oë. 'Jong, ek vertel dit vir jou sodat jy vir my kan bid. God kan enige iets doen – selfs hiermee.' Sy probeer hard om die moedeloosheid uit haar stem te hou. 'Dis waarom die lewe vir my so belangrik is. Dis hoekom ek altyd sê 'n mens leef net een keer. Want ek het nie so lank soos die meeste mense nie.'

Sami vee die trane met haar vingerpunte weg. 'Dis nie regverdig nie.'

'Dit is.' Mary Catherine gaan sit regop. 'Die Here het vir my baie jare gegee, en sal my waarskynlik nog 'n hele klomp jare gee. Daar is nog baie dinge wat ek wil doen – soos om die jeugsentrum vanaand aan die gang te kry. En miskien gaan ek nog vir 'n jaar lank Afrika toe om met weeskinders te werk.'

'Jy sê dit altyd.'

'Ek gaan dit nog eendag op 'n reëndag doen ook.' Mary Catherine kry dit weer reg om te glimlag. 'Ek sal natuurlik ook nog 'n klomp vryvalle gaan doen, en kyk, ek hetoggende soos vanoggend, saam met jou.' Sy kyk uit oor die see en voel hoe 'n bekende vrede haar gees vervul. 'God was meer as regverdig teenoor my.'

'Het jy pyn? Ek bedoel ... laat dit jou borskas pyn?'

'Nee, glad nie.' Sy lig haar hande in die lug en laat hulle weer val. 'Ek voel piekfyn.'

'Gaaf.' Sami kyk weg, haar gesig hartseer. 'Wat van liefde?'

'Wat daarvan?' Mary Catherine voel hoe haar moed in haar skoene sak.

Sami staar haar aan. 'Jy verdien die liefde van 'n goeie man.'

'Nee.' Sy skud haar kop. 'Ek sal nie tyd hê nie.' Mary Catherine voel hoe die trane nou by hár wange ook afloop. 'Maar dit pla my nie.'

Sami kyk haar weer in die oë. 'Jy wou nog altyd iemand vind wat eg is, onthou jy? Iemand soos jy, wat soos jy glo en net so lief is vir die lewe soos jy.' Sami skud haar kop. 'Dit was veronderstel om die wonderwerk van jou lewe te wees, onthou jy?' Sy blaas haar asem hard uit. 'Ek glo dit nie.'

'Sami ... dit maak nie saak nie.' Mary Catherine sit haar hand op haar vriendin se skouer. 'God gaan vir my 'n ander soort wonderwerk gee.' Sy staan op en hou haar hand uit. 'Kom. Kom ons gaan kyk of ons die dolfyne kan sien.'

Sami wag 'n hele rukkie voordat sy Mary Catherine se hand neem. 'Regtig?' Sy hou haar hand oor haar oë sodat sy beter kan sien. 'Behoort jy dit te doen – in die see swem? Is dit ooit goed vir jou?'

'Ja, dis goed vir my.' Sy trek weer haar duikpak aan en hardloop vooruit. 'Hoe meer lewe in my dae, hoe beter. Dan maak dit mos nie saak hoeveel tyd ek het nie. Want ek het die hele tyd regtig gelewe.'

‘Ek pes dit.’ Sami trek haar duikpak aan en haal haar vriendin in. ‘Is jy nie veronderstel om by die huis te bly en te rus nie?’

‘Nooit nie!’ Mary Catherine gryp haar lyfplank en hardloop deur die water. Haar lag meng met die geluid van die branders. ‘Die Here wil my hier buite hê.’

Sami roei tot langs haar. Die oomblik toe hulle in die kalm water agter die branders kom, sien hulle die dolfyne. Daar is drie, en hulle speel net ’n paar tree verder weg.

‘Kyk daar!’ Mary Catherine se vreugde is so eg soos die sonskyn op die water. ‘Ek sou dit vir niks op aarde wou mis nie.’

Sami glimlag vir die eerste keer sedert sy die nuus gehoor het. ‘Ek ken niemand soos jy nie, MC.’

‘Ek sal dit as ’n kompliment beskou.’ Mary Catherine kyk oor haar skouer en sien ’n volmaakte brander aankom. ‘Hier gaan ons!’

Hulle vang die brander en ry na die strand. En toe sien Mary Catherine dat twee van die dolfyne saam met hulle ry. ‘Kyk!’ roep sy.

Sami draai haar kop en sien die dolfyne net voordat hulle omdraai en terug swem see toe. ‘Sjoe!’

‘Dit gebeur nooit nie!’

‘Hulle is so mooi!’ Sami lag nou ook.

Mary Catherine kyk na die strand toe hulle verder ry. Daar is trane in haar oë. Hulle meng met die soutwater, en sy ervaar ’n grenslose geluk. Die swaar gevoel van vroeër is weg. Dit maak nie saak hoeveel jare sy oor het of waarheen God haar hiervandaan gaan lei nie; een ding staan vas.

So lank as wat sy kan asemhaal, gaan sy voluit lewe.

2



DWAYNE DAVIS WAS HER life now.

Lexy watched him behind the wheel, his face twisted in an angry look. He was determined . . . this time he was really going to do it. Which was crazy, because a daytime robbery was the stupidest thing ever. They could both get caught and Lexy would wind up in prison just like her mama. How was she going to tell her grandma something like that?

Dwayne jerked the car into the parking lot of the Shell gas station. Lexy couldn't breathe, couldn't talk. What if the guy behind the counter had a gun? What if Dwayne got shot?

"I'm not sure if we should . . ." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Dwayne slammed the car into park and glared at her. He left the engine running. "Shut up." He looked over his shoulder. "Stay low."

She did as he asked. Her heart pounded against her thin T-shirt. Dwayne was her man. She wasn't ready to lose him. If the store guy had a gun then this could end bad. Really bad. Lexy closed her eyes. She was only sixteen. But they would throw her behind bars. She could already feel the cold metal handcuffs on her wrists.

If he could do it, if Dwayne could pull off the robbery, he'd be leader of the gang. Which would make her the girl everyone wanted to be. That girl. Gang leader's girl. She opened her eyes. Her heart was beating so hard, the noise was all she could hear. Where was he? What was taking so long?

For a quick second she caught her reflection in the mirror. Her dad was black, mom was Hispanic. She had long, straight hair and light brown skin. Guys thought she was pretty. She'd been sleeping around for a year, but the last few months she'd belonged to Dwayne. Him alone.

He made her feel special. Like she was someone.

Lexy peered through the window. She couldn't see the cash register, but she could hear yelling. Probably Dwayne. He was so angry today. Like he could shoot someone without thinking about it. He was actually scaring her.

Suddenly Dwayne burst through the door with a paper bag, probably full of money. He stopped, aimed his gun back toward the store, and fired. At the same time a bullet whizzed past Dwayne's head, barely missing him. "Dwayne! Hurry!" she cried out.

Dwayne turned and ran for the car. He jumped in and sped out of the parking lot. He didn't look at her or say anything. His eyes were like black steel.

Lexy felt like she was going to throw up. The wheels spun as they turned left and peeled down the street. She tried to understand. "Where you going?" Her voice was loud and frantic. She hated this. Why couldn't he talk to her? She could hardly breathe. "Dwayne, where?"

"I'm thinking." He was breathing hard. He looked into the bag as he drove and let out a victory shout. "We did it, Lex . . . we got this thing. Gotta be a couple hundred dollars here."

"Did you . . . did you kill him?"

Dwayne glared at her. "I missed, okay?" He kept one hand on the wheel and lunged at her like he might slap her. Instead he shoved the bag onto the

floorboard.

Lexy didn't dare ask where they were going again. Dwayne was eighteen—he would think of a plan.

Sirens sounded in the distance. Dwayne rattled off a bunch of cusswords. He leaned forward, like he was looking for a way out. The car's steering wasn't the greatest, so he took a turn on two wheels and sped halfway down the street before he pulled over.

Dwayne dropped down in the seat and pulled his baseball cap low over his eyes. "Don't talk."

Lexy wanted to yell at him that she wasn't a baby. She could talk if she wanted to. But then Dwayne might tell her to get out and walk home. If she wanted to belong to him, she needed to do what he asked. She crossed her arms and kept her mouth closed. At his house, when they were in bed, he was the nicest guy in the world. One day he'd quit getting so angry. Maybe if he became leader of the gang. That would make him happy.

Dwayne's phone rang. He was shaking, looking at the money and then checking the rearview mirror. He took his phone from his pocket and answered it. "S'up."

It was a guy's voice on the other end. Lexy could hear that much. But she couldn't make out what he was saying.

Dwayne cussed at the guy and then lowered his voice. "You can't keep changing the rules."

Lexy felt sick again. Must've been someone from the committee, the guys who would decide the next leader of the gang. So far Dwayne was only supposed to hit up a convenience store in the middle of the day. Nothing more. But it was never that easy, not with the WestKnights.

Dwayne shook his head and then smacked his hand on the dashboard. He cussed under his breath this time. "Fine. Tonight." He shook his head, angrier than before. "Later."

Lexy knew better than to ask. Instead she looked straight ahead, her arms still pressed against her stomach.

He slammed his hand against the dashboard again. "Gotta kill three EastTown thugs or Marcus Dillinger. Tonight."

"The baseball player?" Lexy stared at him. "You can't kill him."

Dwayne made a fist and then relaxed it. "Marcus is an easy kill." Dwayne laughed, but the sound seemed dark. Almost evil.

Lexy's heart raced faster than before. Dwayne couldn't be for real. He couldn't kill Marcus Dillinger. The guy was a hero. MVP of the Dodgers. The opening of his youth center was tonight. Killing Marcus? Lexy wanted to scream. Marcus was the hottest player on the Dodgers. From everything she'd

seen on TV he seemed like a great guy. Why would the committee want Marcus dead? None of it made sense.

Dwayne picked up his phone and made a quick call. The voice on the other end sounded like the same guy. “Yo. I made up my mind. I got Dillinger. Tonight.”

Dwayne took off his baseball cap and rubbed his head. He looked over his shoulder behind them. “Police missed us.”

This time, Lexy wanted to say.

He tossed the bag of cash at her. “See what your man did for you, baby? This is only the beginning.” He peered at her as he pulled the car back onto the street. “Now put it down. You don’t touch my money unless I tell you.”

He drove down the street and turned right toward the freeway. With every mile he seemed to relax a little more. “Gonna be a bloody night, baby. Gonna make you proud.”

“You should get the EastTown guys. That’d be better.”

He glared at her again. “Maybe I’ll start with you.”

“I’m just saying you can’t kill a professional—”

“Shut up!” He cursed at her again. “You take orders from me. You got that?”

Lexy felt her anger rise up, but then it fell away. She was here by her own choice.

They drove ten miles south before Dwayne pulled off the freeway and headed north again, toward home. Toward the streets just a few miles from Dodger Stadium.

Lexy felt tears in her eyes. The feeling wasn’t something she was used to. Gang girls didn’t cry. Too much going on. Still, Lexy wished they could take a week off from stealing and killing and claiming territory. The whole thing was exhausting. And now Dwayne was going to kill the city’s favorite baseball player. She should’ve demanded he pull over so she could get out, demanded to be done with this life, but she couldn’t. It was the only life she knew. Besides, she had everything she’d ever wanted.

She was Dwayne Davis’s girl.

Hoofstuk 2

~

D

wayne Davis is nou haar lewe.

Lexy kyk na hom waar hy agter die stuur sit. Sy gesig is vertrek van woede. Hy is vasbeslote ... hierdie keer gaan hy dit regtig doen. Wat kranksinnig is, want 'n rooftog in die middel van die dag is die domste ding op aarde. Hulle kan al twee gevang word en dan sal Lexy in die tronk beland, net soos haar ma. Hoe sal sy ooit so iets vir haar ouma kan sê?

Dwayne pluk die kar om en ry by die parkeerarea van die vulstasie in. Lexy kan nie 'n woord uitkry nie, kan skaars asemhaal. Sê nou die man agter die toonbank het 'n wapen? Sê nou hy skiet vir Dwayne?

'Ek is nie seker ons moet ...' Sy kan aan niks anders dink om te sê nie.

Dwayne hou stil. Hy stamp die rathefboom in *park* en gluur haar aan. Hy laat die enjin luier. 'Bly stil.' Hy kyk oor sy skouer. 'Sit laag.'

Sy doen wat hy vra. Haar hart hamer teen haar dun T-hempie. Dwayne is die man vir haar. Sy wil hom nie verloor nie. As die winkelman 'n wapen het, gaan hier moeilikheid kom. Groot moeilikheid. Lexy maak haar oë toe. Sy is net sestien. Maar hulle gaan haar in die tronk gooi. Sy kan al die boeie om haar polse voel.

As hy dit regkry, as die rooftog slaag, is Dwayne die nuwe leier van die bende. Wat haar die meisie sal maak wat almal beny. Daardie meisie. Die bendeleier se meisie. Sy maak haar oë oop. Haar hart klop so hard dat sy niks anders kan hoor nie. Waar is hy? Waarom vat dit so lank?

Skielik sien sy haarself in die motorspieëltjie. Haar pa was swart, haar ma is Spaans-Amerikaans. Sy het 'n ligbruin vel en dra haar swart hare lank en reguit. Die ouens dink sy is mooi. Sy het die afgelope jaar rondgeslaap, maar die laaste paar maande behoort sy aan Dwayne. Net aan hom.

Hy laat haar spesiaal voel. Asof sy iemand is.

Lexy loer deur die venster. Sy kan nie die kasregister sien nie, maar sy hoor 'n geskreeu. Seker Dwayne. Hy is vandag so kwaad. Asof hy sommer enigiemand sal skiet sonder om twee keer te dink. Eintlik maak hy haar bang. Skielik bars Dwayne by die deur uit met 'n sak in sy hande. Dis seker die geld. Hy gaan staan stil, korrel met sy wapen na binne en skiet. Terselfdertyd vlieg 'n koeël rakelings by sy kop verby. 'Dwayne! Maak gou!' roep sy.

Dwayne draai om en hardloop na die kar toe. Hy spring in, trek weg. Hy kyk nie na haar nie, sê niks. Sy oë is soos swart staal.

Lexy voel naar, asof sy wil opgooi. Die kar se bande skreeu toe hulle by die parkeerarea uitjaag. Sy probeer verstaan. 'Waarheen gaan jy?' Haar stem is hard en benoud. Sy haat die hele besigheid. Waarom praat hy nie met haar nie? Sy kan skaars asemhaal. 'Dwayne, waar?'

'Ek dink.' Hy haal hard asem. In die ry kyk hy in die sak, en roep triomfantelik uit: 'Ons het dit gedoen, Lex! ... Ons het dit reggekry! Ek dink

daar is 'n paar honderd dollar in hierdie sak.'

'Het jy hom ... het jy hom doodgeskiet?'

Dwayne gluur haar aan. 'Ek het misgeskiet, OK?' Hy hou een hand op die stuur en sy ander hand skiet uit, asof hy haar wil slaan. Maar hy druk net die sak op die grond vas.

Lexy waag dit nie weer om te vra waarheen hy gaan nie. Dwayne is agtien – hy sal wel aan 'n plan dink.

Hulle hoor sirenes in die verte. Dwayne laat 'n string vloekwoorde hoor en leun vorentoe, asof hy 'n uitweg soek. Die kar se stuur is nie van die beste nie, en hy draai op twee wiele by 'n straat in. 'n Ent verder hou hy stil. Hy sak laer af in die sitplek en trek sy bofbalpet oor sy oë. 'Moenie iets sê nie.'

Lexy wil vir hom skree dat sy nie 'n baba is nie. Sy sal praat as sy wil. Maar dan sal Dwayne dalk sê sy moet uitklim en huis toe loop. As sy aan hom wil behoort, moet sy doen wat hy vra. Sy kruis haar arms en hou haar mond toe. By die huis, in die bed, is hy die gaafste ou op aarde. Eendag sal hy ophou om so kwaad te wees. Miskien as hy die leier word. Dit sal hom gelukkig maak. Dwayne se selfoon lui. Hy bewe, kyk na die geld en dan in die truspieëltjie. Hy haal sy selfoon uit. 'Jis,' sê hy.

Lexy hoor dit is 'n mansstem wat praat, maar kan nie uitmaak wat hy sê nie.

Dwayne vloek en praat sagter. 'Jy kan nie aanmekaar die reëls verander nie.'

Lexy voel weer naar. Dit is seker iemand van die komitee, die ouens wat gaan besluit wie die bende se volgende leier gaan wees. Tot dusver moes Dwayne net 'n supermarkie in die middel van die dag beroof. Niks anders nie. Maar dinge is nooit eenvoudig nie. Ten minste nie in die WestKnights nie.

Dwayne skud sy kop en slaan teen die paneelbord. Hierdie keer vloek hy binnensmonds. 'Oukei dan. Vanaand.' Hy skud sy kop, kwater as ooit. 'Later.'

Lexy weet sy moenie vrae vra nie. Sy kyk liever reg voor haar, haar arms nog steeds teen haar maag gedruk.

Hy slaan weer teen die paneelbord. 'Ek moet drie EastTown Boyz uithaal. Of vir Marcus Dillinger. Vanaand.'

'Die bofbalspeler?' Lexy staar hom aan. 'Jy kan nie dit doen nie.'

Dwayne bal 'n vuus en maak sy hand oop. 'Marcus sal maklik wees.' Dwayne lag, maar die geluid klink donker. Amper boos.

Lexy se hart klop vinniger as ooit. Dwayne bedoel dit nie. Hy kan nie vir Marcus Dillinger doodmaak nie. Hy is immers 'n held. Die Dodgers se Waardevolste Speler. En sy jeugsentrum word vanaand geopen. Vir Marcus doodmaak? Lexy wil gil. Marcus is die Dodgers se beste speler. Volgens wat sy op televisie sien, is hy 'n goeie ou. Waarom wil die komitee hom dood hê? Dit maak nie sin nie.

Dwayne tel weer sy selfoon op en bel iemand. Die stem aan die ander kant klink soos die vorige een. ‘Oukei. Ek het besluit. Dit sal Dillinger wees. Vanaand.’

Dwayne haal sy bofbalpet af en vryf oor sy kop. Hy kyk weer oor sy skouer. ‘Die pote het ons gemis.’

Hierdie keer, wil Lexy sê.

Hy gooi die sak vol geld na haar toe. ‘Kyk wat jou ou vandag vir jou gedoen het, baby. En dit is net die begin.’ Hy kyk na haar terwyl hy die kar aansit en straataf begin ry. ‘Sit dit eers neer. Jy kan nie daaraan raak voordat ek so sê nie.’

Hy draai regs na die snelweg. Elke kilometer wat hulle aflê, laat hom effens meer ontspan. ‘Gaan ’n bloederige nag wees, baby. Gaan jou trots maak.’

‘Hoekom gaan jy nie vir die EastTown-ouens nie? Dit sal beter wees.’

Hy gluur haar weer aan. ‘Miskien begin ek sommer met jou.’

‘Ek sê maar net jy kan nie ’n professionele—’

‘Bly stil!’ Hy vloek weer. ‘Jy vat jou bevele van my af. Het jy dit?’

Lexy voel die woede in haar opstoot en dan weer bedaar. Sy het immers gekies om hier te wees.

Hulle ry so sestien kilometer in ’n suidelike rigting voordat Dwayne die snelweg verlaat en weer noordwaarts, huis toe, ry. Na strate wat net ’n paar kilometer van die Dodgers se stadion is.

Lexy voel hoe die trane in haar oë opwel. Sy is nie gewoond aan die gevoel nie. Meisies wat in bendes is, huil nie. Daar gebeur te veel dinge. En tog wens Lexy hulle kan net ’n week lank weggaan van al die steel en roof en moord. Die hele ding maak haar moeg. En nou gaan Dwayne die stad se geliefkoosde bofbalspeler uithaal. Sy behoort te eis dat hy stilhou sodat sy kan uitklim, daarop aan te dring dat sy klaar is met hierdie lewe saam met hom, maar sy kan nie. Dit is die enigste lewe wat sy ken. Buitendien het sy mos alles wat sy nog altyd wou hê.

Sy is Dwayne se meisie.

3



COACH OLLIE WAYNE WALKED into the bathroom where his wife,

Rhonda, was finishing up her eye shadow. Ollie came to her and kissed her neck. “You look beautiful. Prettiest coach’s wife ever.”

She cast him a teasing look. “Coach’s wife?”

Ollie loved her spunk. He gave his own forehead a light smack. “What? Did I say coach’s wife?” He did a humble bow. “Forgive me. I meant you’re the prettiest woman in all the world. Wife or not. Forget about just us coaches.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a flirty grin and returned to the mirror. “Will Tyler be there today?”

“Yes. Tyler and his girlfriend. A few other friends of Marcus and the volunteers from the neighborhood.”

Rhonda smiled. “I’m proud of Marcus. What he’s done, it’s really something.”

“He and Tyler have worked on it around the clock.” Ollie sat on the edge of the tub. “He requested that the media not be there tonight. Doesn’t want it to be a circus.”

“See! That’s what I love about him.” Rhonda was putting on her lipstick. “This isn’t about getting another headline.”

“The exact opposite.” Ollie stood. “I’ll bring the car up.”

“Okay.” She grinned at him and returned to the eye shadow. “Five minutes tops.”

Ollie chuckled as he left the bathroom and walked downstairs to the garage. They lived in Silver Lake, in the shadow of Dodger Stadium, an area recently voted the number one most hipster neighborhood in the country. Of course, that wasn’t why Ollie and Rhonda and their family lived there. They’d moved to Silver Lake fifteen years ago when Ollie was hired by the Dodgers. He’d been the head pitching coach for the last decade. They didn’t plan on going anywhere.

Besides, the neighborhood suited them. Organic food and farmer’s markets and the new Whole Foods down the street. People were friendly and the coffee was the best in all of Los Angeles. Ollie and Rhonda loved being with their neighbors and sharing their faith whenever possible.

Ollie climbed in the family’s Suburban and pulled it up the driveway and around to the front of the house. As he waited, Ollie thought about the goodness of God. He and Rhonda were about to celebrate twenty years of marriage. Their three kids were healthy and finding their way through life with a faith that was increasingly their own. Shane was eighteen, a senior shortstop at nearby La Mirada Academy, and at eleven, Tucker was finishing up fifth grade and excited about middle school next year.

The only one Ollie worried about was Sierra. Their pretty brunette was

sixteen, a sophomore at La Mirada. All her life Sierra had been close to Rhonda. The two of them shopped and shared coffee dates and spent Saturday mornings hiking around Silver Lake. But this year things had changed. Sierra had started to hang out with a rougher crowd, and before Christmas break a school monitor caught her in the parking lot with a group of shady kids, ditching class.

More prayer, Ollie told himself. They wouldn't lose Sierra without doing everything in their power to keep her from straying. She was inside now, up in her bedroom studying for a biology test. Ollie almost wished she was coming with them to the youth center instead. Serving someone else might help Sierra remember who she was and the family she belonged to.

Part of the problem was his niece, Shelly. She was nineteen, a fashion design major at USC. Shelly didn't share the same faith as the rest of the family, but Sierra looked up to her. The two would go for coffee or shopping every few weeks. Shelly figured herself too smart to need Jesus, too gifted and financially secure to need redemption. That attitude was rubbing off on Sierra.

Her father—Ollie's brother—was a neurosurgeon. He'd lost control of Shelly long ago. Even before her freshman year at USC, when she moved in with a grad student she was dating at the time, she'd told her parents she didn't share their beliefs or their values.

And now Shelly was dating Marcus Dillinger.

Rhonda came hurrying out and jumped in the passenger side. "Let's do this." She smiled at him as she set her purse on the floor.

"We're picking up Shelly?" Ollie assumed as much.

"Yes." Rhonda gave a careful nod. "Your niece wouldn't miss this."

"Amazing. She's found this sudden desire to help others."

Rhonda gave Ollie a polite smile. "She would pick up trash in the gutter if it meant being close to Marcus."

"I know." Ollie sighed. "What does Marcus see in her?"

This time Rhonda cast Ollie a wary glance. "Really?"

Ollie thought about his niece for a long moment. Tanned, bleach blond, with a body that bore the proof of her twice-daily yoga. She had confidence, a career ahead of her, and money. She was the kind of girl Ollie was used to seeing on the arms of his ballplayers.

But Marcus Dillinger?

His star pitcher had changed so much in the past year. Ever since Tyler Ames arrived, the two of them had shared a quest to change life in the inner city. He had watched Marcus's faith in God grow every week in every area except one: Marcus's decision to date Shelly.

Ollie could only pray that in the next six weeks before spring training,

Marcus would see the light about Shelly. Sooner than later. Before things got more serious. He'd seen some very good men brought down by the wrong women.

Marcus was a great guy, but he wasn't bulletproof.

Hoofstuk 3

~

A

frigter Ollie Wayne kom by die badkamer in waar sy vrou, Rhonda, besig is om haar ooggrimering aan te sit. Ollie kom soen haar in haar nek. 'Jy lyk pragtig. Mooiste afrigtersvrou van almal.'

Sy kyk hom terglustig aan. 'Afrigtersvrou?'

As sy naby is, is daar altyd 'n vonk in die lug. Ollie is mal daaroor. Hy klap liggies teen sy voorkop. 'Wat praat ek alles? Het ek gesê afrigtersvrou?' Hy buig nederig. 'Vergewe my. Ek het bedoel die mooiste vrou in die hele wêreld. Afrigtersvrou of te not. Vergeet van ons afrigters.'

'Dankie.' Sy glimlag uitlokkend, en gaan terug na haar taak voor die spieël. 'Sal Tyler vandag daar wees?'

'Ja, Tyler en sy meisie. Nog 'n paar van Marcus se vriende en vrywilligers uit die omgewing.'

Rhonda glimlag. 'Ek is trots op Marcus. Hy het regtig 'n groot ding gedoen.'

'Hy en Tyler het dag en nag daar gewerk.' Ollie gaan sit op die rand van die bad. 'Hy het gevra dat die media nie vanaand daar moet wees nie.'

'Sien jy! Dis hoekom ek van hom hou.' Rhonda is nou besig met haar lipstiffie. 'Dit gaan nie oor die media en positiewe nuusdekking nie.'

'Presies die teenoorgestelde.' Ollie staan op. 'Ek gaan haal solank die kar.'

'Goed.' Sy glimlag en keer terug na haar ooggrimering. 'Niks langer as vyf minute nie.'

Ollie lag toe hy die badkamer verlaat en na die motorhuis toe stap. Hulle woon in Silver Lake naby die Dodgers se stadion, 'n gebied wat onlangs verklaar is as die *hipsters* se nommer een buurt. Dis natuurlik nie waarom Ollie en sy gesin daar woon nie. Hulle het vyftien jaar gelede daarheen getrek toe Ollie vir die Dodgers kom werk het. Hy is die afgelope tien jaar al die gooiers se hoofafrigter. En hulle is nie van plan om êrens anders te gaan woon nie.

Buitendien hou hulle van die buurt. Die omgewing spog met winkels wat

organiese kos aanhou, boeremarkte en 'n nuwe gesondheidskos-winkel. Die mense is vriendelik en die koffie die beste in Los Angeles. Ollie en Rhonda kuier graag saam met hul bure, en getuig van hul geloof waar hulle kan.

Ollie klim in die gesin se SNV, ry by die oprit uit en parkeer voor die huis. Terwyl hy wag, dink hy aan die goedheid van die Here. Hy en Rhonda gaan een van die dae hul twintigste huwelikshedenking vier. Hul drie kinders is gesond en besig om hul weg deur die lewe te vind en daarby kan hy sien hoe hul geloof groei. Shane is agtien, 'n senior veldwerker tussen tweede en derde bof by Le Mirada Akademie. Sam is elf, in graad 5, en sien uit na sy volgende skooljaar.

Die enigste een oor wie Ollie bekommerd is, is Sierra. Hulle mooi bruinkop is sestien en in graad 10 by Le Mirada. Sy was nog haar lewe lank na aan Rhonda. Die twee het gereeld winkels toe gegaan, saam gaan koffie drink en Saterdag om Silver Lake gaan stap. Maar dinge het vanjaar verander. Sierra het nuwe maats gemaak, en net voor Kersfees het 'n personeellid haar in die parkeerarea van die skool betrap by 'n groep wilde leerders wat klas bank.

Ons moet meer bid, dink Ollie. Hulle sal nie vir Sierra verloor voordat hulle alles in hul vermoë gedoen het om te verhoed dat sy afdwaal nie. Sy is nou by die huis, in haar kamer, aan die leer vir 'n biologie-toets. Ollie wens sy wil saam met hulle na die jeugsentrum toe gaan. Om ander mense te help, sal haar laat onthou wie sy is, en wie die gesin is aan wie sy behoort.

'n Deel van die probleem is Shelly, haar niggie. Dié is negentien en studeer modeontwerp aan die Universiteit van Suid-Kalifornië. Sy deel nie die res van die familie se geloof nie, maar Sierra het nog altyd na haar opgesien. Hulle twee gaan elke nou en dan saam koffie drink of inkopies doen. Shelly dink sy is te slim, te begaafd en te vermoënd om Jesus of verlossing nodig te hê. Haar houding is besig om aan Sierra af te smeer.

Haar pa, Ollie se broer, is 'n neurochirurg. Hy het lankal beheer oor Shelly verloor. Selfs voor haar eerste jaar op universiteit het sy en die student met wie sy uitgegaan het, saamgewoon. Dis toe dat sy haar ouers meegedeel het dat sy hul geloof en waardes verwerp.

En nou gaan sy met Marcus Dillinger uit.

Rhonda kom haastig uit en spring in die motor. 'Weg is ons,' glimlag sy en sit haar handsak op die vloer neer.

'Laai ons vir Shelly op?' Ollie aanvaar so.

'Ja.' Rhonda knik versigtig. 'Jou niggie sal dit nie wil mis nie.'

'Wonderlik. Sy het skielik die begeerte om ander mense te help.'

Rhonda gee 'n beleefde glimlag. 'Sy sal vullis langs die strate optel as sy daardeur naby Marcus kan wees.'

'Ek weet.' Ollie sug. 'Wat op aarde sien Marcus in haar?'

Hierdie keer kyk Rhonda reguit na Ollie. ‘Wonder jy regtig?’

Ollie dink aan sy broerskind. Sy is bruingebrand met blonde hare en ’n lyf wat die resultaat is van joga-oefeninge twee keer ’n dag. Sy is vol selfvertroue, het uitstekende loopbaanvooruitsigte, en sy het baie geld. Sy is die soort meisie wat Ollie dikwels saam met sy spelers sien.

Maar Marcus Dillinger?

Sy sterspeler het die afgelope jaar baie verander. Vandat Tyler Ames gekom het, is die twee besig met ’n missie om die middestad te verander. Hy het gesien hoe Marcus se geloof in God elke week en op elke gebied groei. Behalwe wat sy besluit om met Shelly uit te gaan, betref.

Ollie kan net hoop dat Marcus in die ses weke voor die lenteoefenprogram die lig sal sien omtrent Shelly. Liewer gouer as later. Voordat dinge ernstig raak. Hy het al meer as een keer gesien hoe ’n goeie man tot ’n val kom as gevolg van die verkeerde vrou.

Marcus is ’n wonderlike ou, maar hy is ook nie bestand teen versoekings nie.

4



MARCUS PULLED HIS HUMMER off the freeway and turned right toward the brand new Chairros Youth Center. The afternoon sun was even warmer than expected. Marcus had the windows down and now he turned the radio off and breathed. Just breathed.

God, you did this. You gave me a dream to change things on the streets and now, well . . . here we are. It's all You, Lord.

My son, you will do even greater things in My name. I have chosen you for such a time as this.

The words came like the softest whisper, so real and clear Marcus jerked around to make sure no one was in the backseat. Chills ran down his arms and legs. Was it his imagination or was that really God? Talking to him right here in his SUV?

He felt the adrenaline begin to subside. God was with him. There was no question about that. The whispered words echoed in his head. Marcus wanted to do great things for God. It was the reason he was excited to get up in the morning. This new adventure of faith.

But the idea that he might've been chosen for such a time as this? That thought had never occurred to him until now.

Marcus took a deep breath and focused on the streets ahead. Tyler Ames liked to say he'd spent his life chasing sunsets across the country for baseball. Always heading into the sunset but never really finding it. The elusive happy ending.

Now Tyler agreed with Marcus. The happy ending wasn't in baseball. It was right here—helping other people.

Marcus was five minutes from the center. All he could think about was that early morning when he ran the stairs at Dodger Stadium after Baldy Williams died of a drug overdose.

That morning everything had felt meaningless. The pitching, the fame, the money. All of it. What did a life in pro baseball matter if it could all end in a cold hotel room with a needle in your arm?

So he'd made God a deal. He would believe in Him, if only God would give Marcus's life meaning. Days later Marcus heard from a woman he had once rented a room from, a woman who was calling looking for help for Tyler Ames.

The same Tyler Ames that Marcus had grown up with.

Marcus remembered picking up Tyler at the airport and bringing him back to the stadium. Tyler needed shoulder surgery, and Marcus wanted to pay for it. But Tyler struggled to accept the gift. *This isn't your problem to fix*, he had told Marcus.

But Marcus had only smiled, his heart full. "No. It isn't my problem, Ames. It's my miracle."

And so it was. The answer Marcus had asked for, the meaning he had wanted, started with finding Tyler Ames again and helping him with that surgery. Since then the two of them had worked together to convert an old warehouse into a youth center. A center they believed would make a difference for lost kids in the inner city.

The World Series win and the MVP trophy sitting back home on his bookshelf meant nothing compared to this day. The grand opening of the youth center. A crew of contractors had worked practically around the clock to meet today's deadline.

Marcus pulled his Hummer into the back parking lot. Inside he met up with Officers Joe West and Charlie Kent, along with the mayor. One of the parent volunteers made the introductions, and Marcus thanked them for being part of the celebration. "A year from now," he told the officers, "I hope we can celebrate a drop in crime around here. Kids staying in school. Drug dealers leaving the area. Gangs broken up."

The officers exchanged a look and the older of the two, Officer Kent, stepped forward. “We’d love that.” He looked back at his fellow officer and at the mayor. “But, Marcus . . . we’re not there yet.”

Marcus recognized a heaviness in the man’s words. “Did something happen?”

“If you have a minute, we’d like to talk to you in private before things get started.”

“Sure.” Marcus followed them into a small room. Every part of the building was freshly painted. Three new basketball courts had been built at the front of the center.

When they sat down, Officer Kent took the lead. “You live in Silver Lake, not far from Coach Ollie Wayne’s family, right?”

“Yes.” Marcus felt his heart drop to his knees. He had no idea where this was going.

“You obviously know things are bad in this part of town.” He hesitated. “I’m not sure you understand just how bad.”

Marcus felt himself begin to relax. This was a warning speech. He could handle that. He leaned back in the chair and listened while Officer Kent explained the statistics here in the projects.

“Few of these kids survive. Half of them don’t make it to their twenty-first birthday. The gang activity here is at an all-time high.”

He told Marcus about the WestKnights and the EastTown Boyz—rival gangs that would kill for status and recognition. “We’ve got kids turning tricks, dealing drugs, and killing rival gang members because that’s what their dads and granddads have done for years.”

The weight of the situation settled in around Marcus’s shoulders. “We need to change that.”

“Yes, well, first you need to know something. We’ve gotten reports of some gang activity planned for tonight. Probably right here on this block.” The officer went on to explain that the leader of the WestKnights had been shot and killed last week. “A new leader has to be chosen by committee.”

“Committee? They’re organized?” Marcus had no idea.

“Definitely. They set up challenges for guys trying to lead.”

The other officer nodded. “The challenges usually involve killing. Rival gang members, or innocent people walking by or sitting on their front porch.”

Anger began to build in Marcus. He had been raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles, in Simi Valley, where gang activity was rare. It was impossible to live in Southern California and be ignorant of the gangs in their midst. But Marcus hated that things in this very neighborhood were so bad. He looked from one officer to the other and then to the mayor. “What can we do about

it?"

"Not a lot. We arrest them, of course, but they don't care. There're six young boys ready to join the gang for every one that gets killed or locked up."

Marcus didn't want to feel defeated. "What about educating the kids, helping them find a different way to live?"

"That's possible. It takes money and time. A lot of commitment. There will be setbacks." The mayor straightened his tie. "It's very dangerous trying to make a difference down here. Tough to find volunteers."

Marcus thought about Tyler and Sami and Mary Catherine. The Wayne family and his girlfriend, Shelly. They were committed to the youth center. "Maybe no one's ever really tried."

The three men nodded, but none of them looked encouraged. Officer Kent studied Marcus. "We're just saying be careful. It's not easy coming into an area like this and trying to change things."

Marcus thought for a moment. "What about the Scared Straight program?"

"We used to have it." The other officer nodded. "It didn't work as well as people thought. The recidivism rate was actually higher than for kids not involved in the program."

Images filled Marcus's mind, scenes from the TV show *Beyond Scared Straight*. "I thought it always worked."

"That's just for TV." Officer Kent's expression remained serious. "These kids might not like the idea of prison, but they don't know anything different. In most cases they have a parent there."

A heaviness hung over the small room. Marcus thanked the men for their time and warning. "No matter the danger, I'm supposed to be here. I believe that. We already have local volunteers willing to staff the center around the clock. So that kids will always have a place to get away from the crime and gang activity."

"Yes." Officer Kent smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'd love to see a change." He looked at the other men. "We all would."

Marcus stood first. "My friends will be here soon." He shook each of their hands. "Will you stick around?"

"Absolutely." Officer Kent rose to his feet and the others joined him. "We plan to keep a few patrol cars circling the center. Gangs like to take over a place like this. If that happens, every bit of money and work has been wasted."

"That's why the patrol cars. So that won't happen this time, right?" Marcus waited. He wanted more than hope here. He wanted a promise.

"You have our word." The mayor nodded. "This center will be for kids looking for a way out."

“Great.” Marcus led the way to the door. He couldn’t get out of this meeting fast enough. Yes, of course, he knew the streets were tough. They were dangerous to anyone in this part of town. But if someone didn’t offer these kids hope, then nothing would ever change.

So maybe that’s what the whispered response meant while he was driving in. Maybe this was exactly what God had chosen him to do—to give kids hope where currently they had none. If things had never been worse, like the officers said, then the rest of the whisper made sense, too.

He had been chosen for such a time as this.



JAG AND ASPYN stood in the corner of the room, invisible to human eyes. The news was troubling but not surprising. They had been told from the beginning that this mission would be dangerous. And so it would be. The officers had no idea how serious the gang activity would be that night.

But Jag and Aspyn knew.

They knew about Dwayne Davis and his plan to kill Marcus Dillinger. They knew about the trap Lexy was in and the desperation that filled every home along the streets of this neighborhood. That’s why they were here.

It was time to decide where they would take their stands.

“I’ll be a police officer.” Jag spoke first.

“Good.” Aspyn looked serious, her mind working. “I’ll be a volunteer. A local parent.”

Jag liked the idea.

“We need to break up the gang activity tonight. EastTown plans to kill Dwayne. They know he’s pushing to be the leader of the WestKnights.”

“Such a waste.” Aspyn stayed in place. “Why do they want to kill each other?”

“Sons and daughters of Adam have strange ways of finding identity and power.” Jag watched the two police officers, the mayor, and Marcus Dillinger. “The offer of love and salvation is available for any of them.” He felt the pain of earth. “But they choose this.”

They needed a plan for tonight. Aspyn was small but capable. Jag believed in her. He steadied himself. “The biggest danger tonight is Dwayne Davis. One of us has to stay here at the center. Distract Marcus. Keep him from going out front. No way Dwayne’s coming inside the center tonight. Not with the police here.”

“I’ll stay. I can distract him.” Aspyn’s confidence was unwavering. “All of heaven will be praying. Don’t forget that.”

“Exactly.” Jag thought for a moment. “I’ll deal with the EastTown gang

... and keep watch over Dwayne.”

Aspyn must’ve seen the look in his eyes. She put her hand on his shoulder. “You have nothing to avenge, Jag. Nothing to prove.” Her smile was weighted with understanding. “This is a new mission.”

“I know.” New mission or not, Jag had a score to settle with the enemy. He needed to succeed at this Angels Walking mission. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” Aspyn knew Jag’s past, the reasons he hadn’t been on a mission in ten years. “Remember how this works. You can’t have the assistance of heaven unless you follow the rules.”

“Of course.” He reached out to her. “Let’s pray.”

They held hands and asked God to guide them, to give them wisdom and vision, and to help them prevent any loss of life—one of the directives of those angels who walked among the sons of Adam.

Jag turned to Aspyn. “Godspeed.”

“You, too.”

And with that they were gone.

Hoofstuk 4

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M

arcus draai met sy Hummer van die snelweg af en draai regs na die splinternuwe Chairros Jeugsentrum. Die namiddagson is onverwags warm. Al die vensters is oop en nou skakel hy die radio af en haal net asem. Diep teue vars lug.

Here, U het dit gedoen. U het my ’n droom gegee om dinge in die stad te verander, en nou ... wel, hier is ons. Al die eer kom U toe.

My seun, jy gaan nog groter dinge in My Naam doen. Ek het jou gekies vir ’n tyd soos hierdie.

Die woorde is ’n sagte fluistering, so werklik en duidelik dat Marcus vinnig omdraai om seker te maak daar is niemand op die agtersitplek nie. Koue rillings loop langs sy arms en bene af. Is dit sy verbeelding of is dit regtig die Here? Wat hier in sy viertrekbakkie met hom praat?

Hy voel hoe die adrenalien bedaar. God is by hom. Sonder twyfel. Die gefluisterde woorde eggo nog in sy kop. Marcus wil groot dinge vir die Here doen. Dit is die rede waarom hy deesdae soggens so opgewonde opstaan. Sy nuwe geloofsavontuur.

Maar dat hy spesiaal vir 'n tyd soos hierdie uitgekies is? Daardie gedagte het nog nooit vantevore by hom opgekom nie.

Marcus haal diep asem en fokus weer op die straat voor hom. Tyler Ames sê graag hy het sy lewe lank agter die pot goud aan die einde van die bofbalreënboog rondgetrek. En dit nooit gevind nie. Die ontwykende gelukkige einde.

En deesdae stem hy saam met Tyler. Die gelukkige einde sal hy nie in bofbal kry nie. Maar hy dink hy kan dit hier kry, in sy nuwe projek – besig om mense help.

Marcus is vyf minute van die stadion af. En al waaraan hy kan dink, is daardie oggend toe hy by die trappies van die Dodgers se stadion opgehardloop het, die oggend nadat Baldy Williams van 'n oordosis dwelms gesterf het.

Sy hele lewe het daardie oggend sinneloos gevoel. Die bofbal, die roem, die geld. Alles. Watter betekenis het 'n professionele bofbalspeler se lewe as dit in 'n koue hotelkamer met 'n naald in jou arm kan eindig?

Daarom het hy 'n ooreenkoms met God gesluit. Hy sou in Hom glo as Hy sin en betekenis aan sy lewe gee. En 'n paar dae later hoor hy van 'n vrou by wie hy lank gelede 'n kamer gehuur het, 'n vrou wat hulp soek vir Tyler Ames.

Die Tyler wat saam met hom grootgeword het.

Marcus onthou hoe hy Tyler by die lughawe gaan haal het en na die stadion toe gebring het. Tyler het 'n operasie aan sy skouer nodig gehad, en Marcus wou daarvoor betaal. Dit was vir Tyler moeilik om die geskenk te aanvaar. 'Dis nie jou probleem nie', het hy vir Marcus gesê.

Marcus het net geglimlag, en sy gemoed het volgeskiet. 'Nee, dis nie my probleem nie, Ames. Dit is my wonderwerk.'

En dit was. Die antwoord wat Marcus gesoek het, die sin wat hy gevra het, het begin toe hy weer vir Tyler Ames gekry het en hom gehelp het om die operasie te laat doen. Sedertdien werk die twee saam om 'n ou pakhuis in 'n jeugsentrum te omskep, 'n sentrum wat hulle glo 'n verskil kan maak vir die verlore kinders van die gheto's van die middestad.

In vergelyking met vandag beteken sy wêreldreks-oorwinning en die *Waardevolste Speler*-trofee op sy boekrak niks. Dis die opening van die jeugsentrum. 'n Span kontrakteurs het feitlik dag en nag gewerk om alles betyds te voltooi.

Marcus ry by die parkeerarea agter die gebou in. Binnekant ontmoet hy twee polisiemanne, Joe West en Charlie Kent, en ook die burgemeester. Een van die ouers wat vrywillig kom help, stel hulle voor en Marcus bedank hulle omdat hulle deel van die feesvierings gaan wees. 'Ek hoop dat ons volgende jaar hierdie tyd 'n afname in die misdaad in hierdie gebied sal kan vier. Kinders wat op skool bly. Dwelmlandelaars wat die gebied verlaat.

Bendebedrywigheid wat doodgeloop het.’

Die polisiemanne gee mekaar ’n kyk. Die oudste van die twee, offisier Kent, staan nader. ‘Ons sal baie bly wees as dit gebeur.’ Hy kyk na sy medepolisieman en na die burgemeester. ‘Maar, Marcus ... ons is nog nie daar nie.’

Marcus hoor die erns in die man se stem. ‘Het iets gebeur?’

‘As jy ’n tydjie het, sal ons graag ’n bietjie met jou wil gesels voor die verrigting begin.’

‘Sekerlik.’ Marcus volg hulle na ’n klein vertrekke. Die grootste gedeelte van die gebou is reeds nuut geverf. Aan die voorkant is drie nuwe basketbalbane.

Hulle gaan sit en Charlie Kent neem die voortou. ‘Jy woon in Silver Lake, nie ver van Ollie Wayne-hulle nie, nie waar nie?’

‘Ja.’ Marcus voel hoe sy hart in sy skoen sak. Hy weet glad nie wat hy te wagte moet wees nie.

‘Jy weet natuurlik dat dit sleg gaan in hierdie deel van die stad.’ Hy huiwer. ‘Ek weet net nie of jy besef hóé sleg dit gaan nie.’

Marcus voel hoe hy ontspan. Hy gaan ’n waarskuwingstoespraak kry. Dit kan hy hanteer. Hy leun terug in sy stoel en luister terwyl offisier Kent die statistiek van hierdie deel van die stad verduidelik.

‘Die kanse op oorlewing is skraal. Die helfte van die kinders word nie eens een-en-twintig nie. Die bendes is oral bedrywig, meer as ooit tevore.’

Hy vertel Marcus van die twee bendes, die WestKnights en EastTown Boyz, wat bereid is om moord te pleeg ter wille van status en erkenning. ‘Baie kinders is prostitute, dryf handel met dwelms, en behoort aan bendes, want dit is wat hulle pa’s en oupas nog altyd gedoen het.’

Die situasie is soos ’n swaar las op Marcus se skouers. ‘Ons moet dit verander.’

‘Ja, wel, maar eers moet jy iets weet. Ons het inligting gekry dat die bendes vanaand aktief gaan wees, waarskynlik hier voor die jeugsentrum.’ Die polisieman verduidelik dat die leier van die WestKnights die vorige week doodgeskiet is. ‘Die komitee moet ’n nuwe leier kies.’

‘Komitee? Is hulle dan so georganiseerd?’ Marcus het dit nie geweet nie.

‘Beslis. En hulle stel uitdagings aan die kandidate wat die leier wil word.’

Die ander polisieman knik. ‘Dit beteken gewoonlik ’n moord. Lede van die vyandige bende, of onskuldige mense wat in die straat stap of op hul stoep sit.’

Marcus voel hoe die woede in hom opbou. Hy het grootgeword in ’n voorstad van Los Angeles, in Simi-vallei, waar daar bykans geen bende-aktiwiteit was nie. Dit is onmoontlik om in Suid-Kalifornië te bly en nie te weet van die bendes nie, maar dit ontstel Marcus dat die lewe in hierdie buurt so sleg is. Hy

kyk van die een polisieman na die ander en toe na die burgemeester. 'Wat kan ons aan die situasie doen?'

'Nie veel nie. Ons arresteer hulle natuurlik, maar hulle gee nie om nie. Daar is ses seuns wat wag om in die bende toegelaat te word vir elke een wat doodgemaak of opgesluit word.'

Marcus wil nie so moedeloos voel nie. 'Kan ons nie die kinders oplei en hulle help om 'n ander manier van lewe te vind nie?'

'Dit is moontlik. Maar dit vra geld en tyd. Baie toewyding. En daar sal terugslae wees.' Die burgemeester trek aan sy das. 'Dis gevaarlik om hier te werk en 'n verskil te probeer maak. Moeilik om vrywilligers te kry.'

Marcus dink aan Tyler en Sami en Mary Catherine. Die Wayne-gesin en Shelly. Hulle is vasberade om die jeugsentrum te laat slaag. 'Miskien het niemand nog hard genoeg probeer nie.'

Die drie mans knik, maar dit lyk nie juis asof hulle bemoedig voel nie. Offisier Kent kyk ondersoekend na Marcus. 'Ons sê maar net jy moet versigtig wees. Dit is nie maklik om in 'n gebied soos hierdie in te kom en dinge te probeer verander nie.'

Marcus dink 'n oomblik na. 'Wat van die Skrik wakker!-program?' Hy dink aan die televisieprogram waar geharde misdadigers met jong oortreders praat in 'n poging om hulle so bang vir die misdaadlewe te maak dat hulle besluit om 'n reguit pad te loop.

'Ons het daaraan deelgeneem.' Die ander polisieman knik. 'Dit het nie so goed gewerk soos mense gehoop het nie. Die terugvalsifer was uiteindelik hoër vir die kinders wat deelgeneem het as vir dié wat nie blootgestel is nie.'

Beelde uit die ou televisieprogram kom by Marcus op. 'Ek het gedink dit het elke keer gewerk.'

'Dit was net op die televisie.' Offisier Kent se gesig is ernstig. 'Hierdie kinders hou waarskynlik nie van die idee van tronkstraf nie, maar hulle ken nie 'n ander soort lewe nie. Die meeste van hulle het in elk geval 'n ouer in die tronk.'

Die atmosfeer in die klein vertrekke is somber. Marcus bedank die mans vir hul waarskuwing. 'Al is dit hoe gevaarlik, is dit waar ek moet wees. Ek glo dit. Daar is reeds plaaslike vrywilligers wat gewillig is om 24 uur van die dag diens te doen. Sodat die kinders 'n plek kan hê waar hulle van die misdaad en bendebedrywighede kan wegkom.'

'Ja.' Kent glimlag, maar die glimlag bereik nie sy oë nie. 'Ek hoop dinge verander.' Hy kyk na die ander. 'Almal van ons hoop so.'

Marcus staan op. 'My vriende sal aanstons hier wees.' Hy skud die mans se hande. 'Bly julle vir die openingseremonie?'

'Beslis.' Offisier Kent staan ook op, saam met die ander. 'Ons plan is om 'n

paar patrolliemotors in die omgewing te hê. Bendes hou daarvan om 'n plek soos hierdie oor te neem. As dit gebeur, sal elke stukkie werk en geld verkwis wees.'

'Dis wat die patrolliemotors gaan doen – verhoed dat dit gebeur, nie waar nie?' Marcus wag. Hy wil meer as 'n vae hoop hoor. Hy wil 'n belofte hoor.

'Jy het ons woord.' Die burgemeester knik entoesiasties. 'Hierdie sentrum is vir kinders wat 'n uitweg soek.'

'Gaaf.' Marcus stap deur toe. Hy kan nie gou genoeg wegkom nie. Ja, hy weet die strate is rof. Hulle is gevaarlik vir elkeen wat in hierdie deel van die stad is. Maar as iemand nie vir die kinders hoop kan bring nie, sal niks ooit verander nie.

Miskien is dit wat die fluistering beteken wat hy gehoor het toe hy hierheen gekom het. Miskien is dit presies waarvoor God hom gekies het – om kinders sonder hoop weer hoop te gee. En as dinge nog nooit so sleg was soos nou nie, soos die polisiemanne beweer, maak die res van die fluistering ook nou sin.

Hy is gekies vir 'n tyd soos hierdie.

~

Jag en Aspyn staan in die hoek van die vertrek, onsigbaar vir die mense. Die nuus is kommerwekkend, maar kom nie as 'n verrassing nie. Hulle het van die begin af gehoor dat hul missie gevaarlik sal wees. En dit gaan wees. Die polisiemanne besef glad nie hoe ernstig die bende-aktiwiteite vanaand gaan wees nie.

Maar Jag en Aspyn weet.

Hulle weet van Dwayne Davis en sy plan om Marcus Dillinger dood te maak. Hulle weet van die doodloopstraat waarin Lexy haar bevind, en die desperaatheid in elke huis in hierdie buurt. Dit is waarom hulle hier is.

Dit is tyd om te besluit waar hulle stelling gaan inneem.

'Ek sal 'n polisieman wees.' Jag praat eerste.

'Gaaf.' Aspyn dink diep en ernstig. 'Ek sal 'n vrywilliger wees. 'n Plaaslike ouer.'

Jag hou van die plan.

'Ons moet vanaand die bendebedrywighede opbreek. EastTown se plan is om Dwayne dood te maak. Hulle weet hy wil leier van die WestKnights word.'

'Dis so 'n vermorsing.' Aspyn bly waar sy is. 'Waarom wil hulle mekaar doodmaak?'

'Die seuns en dogters van Adam het vreemde maniere om identiteit te vind en mag te verkry.' Jag kyk na die twee polisiemanne, die burgemeester en Marcus Dillinger. 'Elkeen word liefde en verlossing aangebied.' Hy voel die

pyn van die aarde aan. ‘En dan kies hulle dit.’

Hulle moet ’n plan vir vanaand uitwerk. Aspyn is klein, maar baie vaardig. Jag glo in haar. Hy ontspan doelbewus. ‘Die grootste gevaar vanaand is Dwayne Davis. Een van ons moet hier by die sentrum bly. Hou Marcus besig. Keer dat hy voor uitgaan. Dwayne sal nie vanaand kans sien om in te kom nie. Nie as hier polisiemanne is nie.’

‘Ek sal bly. Ek kan hom besig hou.’ Aspyn is steeds vol vertroue. ‘Almal in die hemel sal bid. Moet dit nie vergeet nie.’

‘Presies.’ Jag dink ’n oomblik na. ‘Ek sal die EastTown-bende hanteer ... en wag hou oor Dwayne.’

Aspyn moes die kyk in sy oë gesien het, want sy sit haar hand op sy skouer.

‘Jy het niks te wreek nie, Jag. Niks te bewys nie.’ Haar glimlag is vol begrip.

‘Ons is op ’n nuwe sending.’

‘Ek weet.’ Maar nuwe missie ten spyte, Jag het ’n vyand om mee af te reken.

Hy moet suksesvol wees in hierdie engele-missie. ‘Alles sal uitwerk.’

‘Goed dan.’ Aspyn ken sy verlede, die rede waarom hy vir tien jaar nie op ’n missie was nie. ‘Onthou hoe dit werk. Jy kan nie hulp uit die hemel verwag as jy nie by die reëls hou nie.’

‘Natuurlik nie.’ Hy steek sy hand na haar uit. ‘Kom ons bid.’

Hulle hou hande vas en bid dat God hulle sal lei, vir hulle wysheid en insig sal gee, en hulle sal help om lewensverlies te verhoed. Laasgenoemde is altyd een van die opdragte aan die engele wat tussen die kinders van Adam beweeg.

Jag draai na Aspyn. ‘Mag die Here by jou wees.’

‘En by jou.’

En die volgende oomblik is hulle weg.

5



JAG HAD NO TROUBLE finding the alley where the EastTown Boyz hunkered down, waiting for nightfall. He could see the enemy gathered in the shadows up and down the passageway. He could feel the presence of darkness.

You're not winning this one, he thought to himself. “Jesus has already defeated you.” He uttered the words out loud and smiled when the demons in

the shadows cringed, when they shrank back in fear.

The name of Jesus. Scripture was clear about the power of that one name. At the mention of Jesus the demons had no choice but to obey. Every time.

But that didn't mean the enemy would run from a fight.

As soon as they gathered themselves, the dark beings lunged toward Jag, hissing at him, trying to scare him from their gathering. "This is our territory."

But Jag wasn't about to move. "I'm here in the name of Jesus."

Again they twisted, writhing in pain at the sound of the name of the Savior.

Jag felt a holy satisfaction. How dare the enemy send his evil army to destroy the sons and daughters of God, His chosen ones, His creation? Moments like this made Jag impatient for the time when all angels would be unleashed and the enemy would be overthrown once and for all. When time ended and eternity began.

Until then, Jag wasn't backing down. The scene about to play out tonight was all too familiar. He'd already failed on a day like this one.

While the demons hissed and spat at him, Jag remembered. The years faded and Jag was there again. That Angels Walking mission had also been in Los Angeles. Jag had been assigned to protect a man of great faith, a police officer. Terrance Williams was his name. He had been called to testify against one of the city's most notorious drug dealers.

There had been only two days left in the trial when Jag failed.

Up until that point Jag had kept Terrance Williams safe at every turn. Two hit men had been assigned the job of killing the officer. In the weeks that led up to that fateful day, Jag had found ways to distract Williams, ways that had saved his life. Jag had also created obstacles for the killers, delays that had kept the men from carrying out the murder.

The whole time Jag knew the situation. The murder was the bad guys' only hope to avoid a guilty verdict. If the trial reached a guilty verdict before the hired guns could kill Williams, then the deal was off. No hit, no payment. No point. With only two days left in the trial, Jag was hovering behind Officer Williams's car when the man stopped at his son's school.

This was not part of the plan.

Jag hadn't known that on that day the man's son was in a class play, or that the boy had invited his father to watch. Jag had missed that. Even now, with a host of demons threatening him, Jag could see what had happened that day. Terrance Williams had parked his police car across the street from the school and gone inside. Jag had been nervous, his instincts on high alert. His Angels Walking partner had been across town, working behind the scenes at the courthouse.

So Jag was alone.

He stayed in the auditorium with Officer Williams for the entire hour-long school program. It was an hour Jag could still remember, every detail. The boy attended a Christian school and that day he sang a solo from the front of the stage. "How Great Thou Art." Halfway through the performance Jag saw Terrance Williams wipe tears from his eyes.

The boy was ten years old and everything to the man.

Which created a problem. What if Terrance decided to take the boy home with him early? For weeks, when Terrance picked his son up, Jag had his Angels Walking partner with him. Together they had been able to protect both father and son.

But that day Jag could feel the demons, same as he could feel them now. Without his partner he would be outnumbered if a battle ensued.

Long before the program was over, Jag knew the hit men would be waiting for Williams, their guns trained on him from the moment he left the school. They had followed him here. Jag knew he would have to appear like one of the parents picking up their child at school.

But he had wondered if his efforts would be enough.

As the program ended, Jag had materialized in a hallway outside the auditorium. He looked like any other parent as he walked into the crowded room. Quickly he found Terrance Williams and his son, Ryan. Jag had walked up and put his hand on Ryan's shoulder. "Hello. You're Ryan Williams, right?"

The child looked startled. Same with his father. Officer Williams stepped forward. "I don't believe we've met."

"I'm Jag. My nephew Billy Goodall is in Ryan's class." Jag smiled. But he could see the confusion on the officer's face.

"How do you know Ryan?" The man pulled his son close.

"Ryan's been a good friend to my nephew." It was true. Information Jag had picked up during the mission. "Billy gets picked on by the other kids, but Ryan . . . he stands up for Billy."

Ryan smiled and looked at his dad. "Billy's my friend."

Jag remembered feeling desperate. He was out of ideas. He needed time to figure out how to get between Terrance and the hit men. If Jag could delay the officer long enough, the hit men would leave. They needed the cover of a crowd to pull off their deed without getting caught.

"Okay, well . . . thank you for saying so." Terrance Williams took a step back. "We need to go."

Jag could still feel the way his heart had fallen. If only they could've stayed in that moment. He would've begged God to freeze time so that the

father and son might've stayed there, safe in the auditorium.

But freezing time was not something angels could do.

"See you." Terrance Williams waved and then he smiled at his son. "Mom made lasagna!"

"Hold on!" Jag had followed him. For five minutes he tried stalling by asking the officer questions. But in the end, it wasn't enough. As they left the school, Jag stayed behind them. He saw the hit man across the street behind the wheel of his car, saw him lift his gun, aiming for Terrance Williams, and in that split second Jag tried to knock both of them to the ground. "Look out!" Jag had shouted.

But years of police training kept Terrance standing on his feet even as his son hit the grass face first. The bullet was through Terrance's chest before Jag could say another word.

"Daddy!" Ryan screamed, and ran to his father's side. "Daddy, no!"

Demons celebrated in the air above them as Jag rushed up to Terrance. A crowd gathered quickly, but Jag kept them at bay. "Give us room. I know CPR."

But even as Jag began administering chest compressions, he knew it was too late. The gunman had been too accurate. Ryan stayed near his father's head, patting his hair and crying. "Please, Daddy, wake up! Please, God!"

That afternoon Jag tried for twelve minutes until the paramedics arrived. Only then did he stand up and disappear into the crowd. He watched the rest of the scene from a few feet away, hovering over the fallen officer and his brokenhearted son.

Please, God, he had prayed. Don't let him die.

Paramedics finally helped Ryan away from his dying father. Even then the boy stood as close as he could, reaching out both hands and crying for his daddy. It was a scene etched forever in Jag's mind. They didn't officially declare Officer Williams dead until an hour later at the hospital. By then Ryan's mother was with him, along with half the officers from Terrance Williams's precinct.

But none of that changed the truth for Jag.

He had failed.

The loss of Terrance Williams made Jag doubt his very purpose. He had been given one task—protect the life of Terrance Williams. Yes, God knew the number of a man's days. But sometimes that number was small because the enemy had cut it short.

The demons in the alleyway hissed at him again, grabbing for him.

"Jesus will win this battle."

Screeches filled the air, the demons recoiling in painful fear.

Jag remembered what happened after his last failed Angels Walking mission. The other angels had tried to comfort him. Failure was always possible. The enemy would win some battles—but not the war. The other police officers would care for Ryan Williams now. He would never be without the love of a father figure.

Jag had appreciated their efforts. Their words were true.

But none of that would ever give Ryan Williams his daddy back. Jag had failed. He would always believe the failure was his fault. He should've found another way to protect Terrance.

It had taken every one of the past ten years to believe he could be used by God again. When he learned of this mission, of the danger it entailed, he knew it was time. His chance—not only to find victory in this mission, but to make right the one he'd failed at a decade ago.

The sun was setting. Darkness gathered in the alleyway. The demons continued to hiss and scream. If they had it their way, someone was going to die tonight. Several people, maybe. And somewhere on the other side of the new Chairis Youth Center, Dwayne Davis was feeling the same way. Ready to kill Marcus Dillinger.

Jag wasn't afraid.

This time he had a plan that would work.

Hoofstuk 5

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J

ag sukkel nie om die stegie te vind waar die EastTown Boyz versamel het terwyl hulle vir die donker wag nie. Hy sien ook die vyand in die skadu's verder aan in die stegie. Hy voel die teenwoordigheid van die duisternis aan.

Julle gaan nie hierdie keer wen nie, dink hy. 'Jesus het julle reeds verslaan.' Hy sê die woorde hardop en glimlag toe hy sien hoe die bese geeste vreesbevange terugdeins.

Die Naam van Jesus. Die Skrif is duidelik oor die krag van sy Naam. Wanneer sy Naam genoem word, het die demone geen keuse nie: Hulle moet gehoorsaam. Elke keer.

Maar dit beteken nie dat die vyand van die geveg sal weghardloop nie.

Toe hulle tot verhaal kom, sak hulle saam op Jag toe, sis hardop en probeer hom bangmaak sodat hy sal weggaan. 'Dit is ons gebied hierdie.'

Maar Jag is nie van plan om te beweeg nie. 'Ek is hier in die Naam van Jesus.'

Hulle steier weer terug, krullend van pyn by die aanhoor van die Naam van die Verlosser.

Jag voel 'n heilige tevredenheid. Hoe durf die vyand sy onderdane stuur om die seuns en dogters van God te vernietig? Is hulle nie sy uitverkorenes, sy skepping nie? In oomblikke soos hierdie kan Jag nie wag vir die dag wanneer al die engele uitgestuur sal word en die vyand eens en vir altyd verslaan sal word nie. Die dag wanneer tyd tot 'n einde sal kom en die ewigheid begin.

Maar tot dan gaan Jag nie terugstaan nie. Hy ken die toneel wat vanaand voor hom gaan afspeel alte goed. By 'n vorige geleentheid was hy die een wat gefaal het.

Terwyl die demone sis en blaas, gaan sy gedagtes terug. Die jare vervaag en Jag is weer daar. Daardie engele-missie was ook in Los Angeles. Jag is aangestel om 'n gelowige polisieman, Terrance Williams, te beskerm. Hy is gevra om teen een van die stad se mees berugte dwelmshandelaars te getuig.

Daar was net twee dae oor voordat die verhoor sou begin toe Jag misluk het.

Tot op daardie tydstip het hy dit reggekry om Terrance Williams veilig te hou. Twee huurmoordenaars moes hom doodmaak. In die weke vooraf het Jag maniere gevind om Williams se aandag af te lei, maniere wat sy lewe gered het. Jag het ook hindernisse vir die moordenaars geskep, dinge wat hulle vertraag het en gekeer het dat hulle die moord pleeg.

Jag het goed besef wat die situasie was. Die moord was die boosdoeners se enigste hoop om 'n skuldigbevinding te vermy. As die verhoor sou plaasvind en hulle skuldig bevind word voordat Williams vermoor kon word, sou die moordenaars geen betaling kry nie. Toe daar net twee dae voor die verhoor oor was, was Jag agter Williams toe hy by sy seun se skool stilhou.

Dit was nie deel van die plan nie.

Jag het nie geweet dat die seun in 'n opvoering sou deelneem of dat hy sy pa daarheen genooi het nie. Jag het die moontlikheid misgekyk. Selfs nou, met 'n hele skare demone wat hom dreig, sien Jag duidelik wat daardie dag gebeur het. Terrance Williams het sy polisiemotor in die straat voor die skool parkeer en ingegaan. Jag was senuagtig, al sy instinkte op aandag. Sy vennoot was in 'n ander deel van die stad, besig om agter die skerms by die hofgebou te werk. Jag was alleen.

Hy het in die saal by Williams gebly vir die uur wat die opvoering geduur het. Jag onthou elke besonderheid van daardie uur. Die seun was by 'n Christenskool en het daardie dag 'Hoe groot is U' gesing. Halfpad deur die lied het Jag gesien hoe Williams trane afvee.

Die seun was tien en het die wêreld vir sy pa beteken.

En dit het die probleem veroorsaak. Sê nou Terrance besluit om die seun vroeg huis toe te neem? Jag se vennoot was vantevore altyd by wanneer die pa sy seun by die skool oplaai. Saam kon hulle die pa en seun beskerm.

Maar daardie dag het Jag die teenwoordigheid van die demone aangevoel, net soos hy dit vandag kan doen. Sonder sy maat sou hy in die komende geveg in die minderheid wees.

Lank voor die program verby was, het Jag geweet dat moordenaars buite vir Williams wag en dat hul wapens op hom gerig sou wees wanneer hy die skoolgebou verlaat. Hulle het hom daarheen gevolg. Jag het geweet dat hy as 'n ouer wat sy kind oplaai sou moes verskyn.

Maar hy het gewonder of hy genoeg sou kon doen.

Aan die einde van die program het Jag buite die saal verskyn. Hy het net soos enige ander ouer gelyk toe hy in die vol saal aankom. Hy het Terrance en sy seun, Ryan, dadelik raakgesien, nader gestaan en sy hand op Ryan se skouer gesit. 'Hallo. Jy is Ryan Williams, nie waar nie?'

Die kind het verskrik gelyk. Sy pa ook. Williams het nader gestaan. 'Ek glo nie ons ken mekaar nie.'

'Ek is Jag. My nefie Billy Goodall is saam met Ryan in die klas.' Jag het geglimlag. Maar hy kon die verwarring op die polisieman se gesig sien.

'Ken jy vir Ryan?' Die man het sy seuntjie na hom toe getrek.

'Ryan is 'n goeie maat vir my nefie.' Dit was waar; inligting wat Jag iewers tydens die missie opgetel het. 'Party van die kinders pik op Billy, maar Ryan ... hy kom altyd op vir Billy.'

Ryan het geglimlag en na sy pa gekyk. 'Ek en Billy is maats.'

Jag onthou hoe desperaat hy gevoel het. Hy het nie meer planne gehad nie. Hy het tyd nodig gehad om uit te werk hoe hy tussen Williams en die moordenaars kon kom. As Jag die polisieman lank genoeg kon vertraag, sou die moordenaars weggaan. Hulle het 'n skare mense nodig gehad om hul moord te pleeg sonder om gevang te word.

'Goed. Wel, dankie dat jy vir my gesê het.' Terrance Williams het begin wegloup. 'Ons moet gaan.'

Jag onthou hoe sy moed tot in sy skoene gesak het. As hulle net 'n paar minute langer kon bly. Hy wou God smee om die tyd te laat stilstaan sodat die pa en seun net daar in die saal kon bly, daar waar hulle veilig was.

Maar engele kan nie die tyd laat stilstaan nie.

'Sien jou.' Williams het gewaai en toe vir sy seun geglimlag. 'Mamma het lasagne gemaak!'

'Wag net 'n oomblik!' Jag het hulle gevolg, en die polisieman vyf minute met allerhande vrae besig gehou. Maar uiteindelik was dit nie lank genoeg nie. Toe hulle die skool verlaat, was Jag agter hulle. Hy het die moordenaar in sy

motor gesien aan die oorkant van die straat, gesien hoe hy sy wapen lig, hoe hy op Williams korrel. In daardie sekonde het hy probeer om hulle grond toe te stamp. ‘Oppas!’ het hy uitgeroep.

Maar sy jare van polisiëring het Williams op sy voete gehou, al het sy seun gesig eerste op die grond geland. Die koeël was deur Williams se borskas voordat Jag nog ’n woord kon uitkry.

‘Pappa!’ het Ryan geskreeu en na sy pa toe gehardloop. ‘Pappa!’

Die demone het al begin feesvier toe Jag na Terrance toe hardloop. ’n Skare het gou om hulle versamel, maar Jag het hulle weggehou. ‘Maak plek! Ek ken eerstehulp.’

Maar Jag het geweet dit is te laat vir enige hulp. Die sluipskutters was akkuraat. Ryan het by sy pa se kop gesit, oor sy hare gevryf en gehuil. ‘Word wakker, Pappa! Asseblief, Here!’

Jag het twaalf minute lank probeer om Williams se hart aan die gang te kry, tot die paramedici aangekom het. Eers toe het hy opgestaan en in die skare verdwyn. Hy het die toneel van ’n paar meter ver dopgehou, in die lug bokant die gevalle polisieman en sy gebroke seuntjie.

Asseblief, Here, moenie toelaat dat hy sterf nie, het hy gebid.

Die paramedici het Ryan uiteindelik weggelei van sy sterwende pa af. Selfs toe het die seun so naby as moontlik aan hom gebly, sy hande uitgestrek, in trane. Daardie toneel sal vir altyd in Jag se gedagtes vasgevang bly. Hulle het die polisieman eers ’n uur later, by die hospitaal, dood verklaar. Teen daardie tyd was Ryan se ma by hom, en ook elke polisieman van sy polisiekantoor.

Maar niks kon die waarheid vir Jag verander nie.

Hy het gefaal.

Die verlies van Terrance het hom laat twyfel aan sy roeping. Hy het net een taak gehad – om Terrance Williams se lewe te beskerm. Ja, ’n mens se lewensdae is in God se boek opgeskryf. Maar soms word ’n mens se tyd op aarde deur die vyand kortgeknip.

Die demone in die stegie is nog aan die koggel; hulle gryp sissend na hom.

‘Jesus sal hierdie stryd wen.’

’n Geskreeu vul die lug, en die demone deins vreesbevange terug.

Jag onthou wat na sy laaste, mislukte sending gebeur het. Die ander engele het hom probeer troos. Mislukking is altyd ’n moontlikheid. Die vyand wen soms die stryd, alhoewel hulle nie die oorlog kan wen nie. Die ander polisiemanne sal na Ryan Williams omsien. Hy sal nie sonder die liefde van ’n vaderfiguur grootword nie.

Jag het die engele se pogings waardeur. Hulle woorde was waar.

Maar dit kon nie vir Ryan sy pa teruggee nie. Jag het gefaal. Hy sal altyd glo dat die mislukking sy skuld was. Hy moes ’n manier gevind het om Terrance

te beskerm.

Dit het tien jaar gekos voordat hy weer kon glo dat God hom nog kan gebruik. Toe hy van hierdie missie hoor, uitgevind het hoe gevaarlik dit is, het hy geweet die tyd het aangebreek. Sy kans, nie net om in hierdie missie te slaag nie, maar om te vergoed vir die een waarin hy tien jaar gelede misluk het.

Die son is besig om onder te gaan. Die stegie word donker. Die demone skreeu en sis nog altyddeur. As hulle hul sin kry, gaan iemand vanaand sterf. Miskien selfs verskeie mense. En iewers aan die ander kant van die Chairos Jeugsentrum het Dwayne Davis dieselfde voorneme. Hy is gereed om Marcus Dillinger dood te maak.

Jag is nie bang nie.

Hierdie keer het hy 'n plan wat gaan werk.



MARY CATHERINE AND SAMI walked into the new youth center just after three o'clock. She felt more like herself again. Now that she had told Sami the truth about her heart. At their apartment earlier Mary Catherine had made Sami promise she wouldn't treat her any differently.

"I'm not dying," Mary Catherine had said. "Not yet."

"But you will . . . too soon."

Mary Catherine had held up her finger and shook her head. "None of us knows how long we have."

Eventually Sami had agreed. "God wants us to live today, that's what you're saying? He'll handle the rest?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Since then they hadn't talked about it. Sami was a little quieter than usual, but nothing the guys would notice. Mary Catherine was only glad the discussion was behind them. As difficult as it was to share the news with Sami, Mary Catherine had wanted her best friend to know.

They headed through the triple gymnasium into the Virginia Hutcheson Hall, the place where tutoring would happen every school day afternoon and evening. Today, though, tables were set up around the perimeter for the grand opening. Marcus was carrying a box of plates to one of the tables.

Mary Catherine felt it again, the way her dying heart came fully alive in his presence. She chided herself to keep tight control over her emotions. Marcus wasn't interested, anyway.

"Sami!" Tyler was at the opposite side of the room setting out plastic cups. She hurried to meet him.

Mary Catherine made eye contact with Marcus. At the same time, the box he was carrying broke open and plates started to fall to the ground a few at a time.

She hurried over and began picking them up. "Perfect timing."

"So you were late on purpose?" Marcus set the box down and helped her gather the plates from the floor.

"Late?" Mary Catherine hoped he couldn't see the heat in her cheeks. "It's not fashionable to be exactly on time. You should know that."

Mary Catherine and Marcus always slipped into this teasing type of banter. Sarcastic and even a little flirty. Nothing too deep. The two of them held the box together long enough to get it to the table.

“Seriously. How can I help?” Mary Catherine kept her tone light. She probably should’ve gone to the other room and helped Sami and Tyler. It did her no good being around Marcus. Not when he had this magnetic pull on her. Like being in his presence caused the oxygen to leave the room.

“I still have to wash down half a dozen tables in the back.” He winked at her. “You can help.”

Mary Catherine looked over her shoulder. “I thought the Waynes were coming.”

“They are.” He grinned. “Even more fashionably late than you and Sami.”

Before they could head to the back for the dirty tables, Coach Ollie Wayne, his wife, and his niece entered the room. “We’re here!” Rhonda Wayne led the way. “Ready to help!”

Mary Catherine took a step back. As she did, Shelly set her eyes on Marcus and came to him. She looked like a hunter eyeing her prey. Mary Catherine felt her frustration rise. *Don’t be catty*, she told herself. *You have no reason to be jealous. Just walk away.*

Shelly reached Marcus and gave him a long hug and a kiss on his lips. Marcus looked surprised, and maybe a little embarrassed. He chuckled. “Well, hey there.”

“Help can mean a lot of things, right?” Shelly spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

Mary Catherine was ready for a new location.

She crossed the room to where Rhonda Wayne was helping Sami with the cups. Rhonda was explaining that they’d brought six flats of water bottles. “I’d like to get them in the fridge.”

“That’s another project.” Tyler was bringing in empty jugs. “Someone donated three additional refrigerators a few hours ago.” He made a face. “They work, but they’re filthy.”

“Perfect.” Rhonda clapped her hands and looked at Mary Catherine. “You up for some refrigerator cleaning?”

“Definitely.”

On the way back to the kitchen, Rhonda introduced herself. “I’ve heard of you. Sami can’t stop talking about how you taught her how to live.” Rhonda smiled. “You’re her hero.”

“That’s sweet.” Mary Catherine felt the compliment to the center of her soul. She had no idea Sami talked about her to other people. God was letting her help other people learn how to live—even while she was dying. “I hear a

lot about your family, too. I guess yours is the hangout house.”

“Marcus lives in the neighborhood, and you probably know Tyler’s staying with him for now. They come over for dinner, and then a game of pool breaks out and the two of them stay till midnight. Happens all the time.”

Mary Catherine could picture that. Sami had been there many times with Tyler. Apparently, Shelly was usually there, too. “You host a house church, right? That’s what Sami told me.”

“Yes.” They reached the refrigerators and found a few empty buckets. “Our pastor stepped down so our main church is in transition. For the next few months the staff encouraged us to meet in our homes. Invite neighbors, that sort of thing. Tyler and Sami have been joining us for a while now.” Rhonda found a few rags and she and Mary Catherine filled the buckets with hot soapy water. “Do you have a church?”

“I do. It’s an hour away.”

“Well, then join us tomorrow. We’d love to have you!”

The invitation was tempting. “Thank you. Maybe some other time.” Mary Catherine couldn’t attend. Not when Shelly would be there fawning over Marcus. In that setting it would be almost impossible to focus on God. Besides, the hour drive each way was good for her. Time to pray and sing and remind herself that true happiness could only come if she busied herself with things that mattered.

Things like this.

She and Rhonda worked for an hour cleaning the refrigerators, until the mold and the mildew were gone. They even found a box of baking soda in the pantry and after a few rinses the shelves actually smelled clean.

The whole time they talked about family and faith, how Rhonda and Ollie liked to think of their home as a church in more ways than one. “We ask God to fill our home, and then He does. Every time.” Rhonda’s laugh came easily. “Not saying it isn’t crazy around the dinner table sometimes, but it’s worth it.”

Mary Catherine tried not to feel jealous. That was the type of home she had always wanted. Instead she’d been an only child raised by wealthy parents. Parents too busy with their social clubs and charities to notice their daughter’s loneliness.

Maybe someday she would take Rhonda up on her offer and attend home church at their house. Whenever Mary Catherine stopped reacting every time she saw Marcus Dillinger. However long that might take.

When they finished, Mary Catherine and Rhonda joined the others in the hall. The place had filled up. Volunteers from the neighborhood had flooded the place and half the tables were full of cookies and cupcakes. In another

room, neighbors were helping set up games and filling bowls with candy.

Marcus and Tyler hadn't missed a detail.

Mary Catherine found Sami working on one of the dessert tables. Shelly was helping Coach Wayne at the other end of the room. "Where's Marcus?"

"The police wanted to talk to him and Tyler." Sami didn't sound worried. "Probably just figuring out logistics for tonight. They're expecting a ton of people."

A few minutes later Marcus and Tyler returned, their expressions concerned. Tyler motioned to Sami and Mary Catherine. "We need to talk to you." He pointed across the room. "Mary Catherine, could you get Rhonda and Ollie Wayne? They need to be there, too."

Something was wrong. Mary Catherine could feel it. In this part of town, there was no telling what had happened, but whatever it was the guys were deeply concerned. She found the coach and his wife and they headed to the small room with the others.

Once they were in the small room, Marcus took over. "The police have warned us." He looked alarmed and more than a little frustrated. "The two largest gangs in the area, the WestKnights and EastTown Boyz, are planning a confrontation tonight. Here. In front of the youth center."

For several seconds, no one said anything. Coach Wayne was the first to talk. "They should call in backup. You can't let a bunch of thugs ruin this for everyone else."

"It's their way of resisting change." Marcus pinched his lips together. "That's what the officers said."

"Well, that's not right." Rhonda stood at her husband's side. "I agree with Ollie. Let's get more police out here. Until they figure out that this isn't a place for gangs."

Sami stood next to Tyler. She looked terrified. "Maybe we should call it off. We can do this next week, right? Let the police figure it out and try again when the gangs aren't threatening."

"We can't do that." Mary Catherine's words came before she could stop them. "We need to pray. God will keep us safe. We just have to ask Him."

Marcus looked at her and his eyes softened. "I like it." He held his hands out to the others in the room. "Let's pray. The police will keep a watch out front, and here on the inside we'll just love on whatever kids come through the door."

A quick discussion broke out about whether they should cancel, but in the end everyone agreed on moving forward and praying for protection. God was with them. Who could come against them? As they formed a circle, Mary Catherine realized too late that she was standing closest to Marcus. He

reached for her hand. As he did, he whispered, "Thank you."

She smiled and gave him the slightest nod.

Then it happened. His hand was around hers, his fingers warm and strong. Something about the feeling felt familiar and breathtaking all at once. *Dear God, help me think. Help my heart get back in line. Please.*

Coach Ollie was praying, asking God for protection, asking that He place His angels around the building to keep them safe at tonight's open house.

Mary Catherine could barely concentrate. When the prayer ended, Marcus gave her hand a slight squeeze. He smiled at her. "Seriously. Thank you." He allowed a brief laugh. "I can't believe no one else thought to pray."

"No big deal." She needed to get away from him. Falling into his gravity wasn't going to do her any good. "I'm going to check on the game room."

"Okay." He looked like he might ask her to stay. But instead he hesitated and then he turned to Coach Wayne and his wife.

Moving as quickly as she could, Mary Catherine returned to the game room. A new volunteer had arrived, a willowy young black woman who didn't seem to have come with anyone. Mary Catherine came up to her. "Hi. I'm Mary Catherine."

"Hi." The new woman held out her hand. "I'm a parent in the neighborhood. Aspy. Thought you could use the help."

"Aspy. That's pretty." Mary Catherine checked the time. It was close to five o'clock. The pizza would be there in an hour. "Let's work on the corn hole boards."

They walked over to a part of the room where six corn hole games needed to be set up. Someone had left a set of directions, so together she and Aspy got to work. "How long have you lived in the neighborhood?"

"Not long, actually." Aspy smiled. She had the greenest eyes. Something about them looked almost otherworldly. "I figured no time like the present to jump in and help."

"Do you know Marcus?"

"Not well." Aspy smiled. "I know he plays ball."

"Yes. That he does." They both laughed and Mary Catherine was grateful to talk with someone new.

Across the room, Marcus and Shelly set up a small plastic basketball hoop. Mary Catherine tried not to watch, but it was impossible. The girl was hanging all over Marcus.

Aspy seemed to notice. She looked that way and then turned her eyes back to Mary Catherine. "She's not his type."

"Who?" Mary Catherine wasn't sure what her new friend meant.

"Shelly Wayne. She's too young. Too much growing up to do." Aspy

smiled. “If you ask me, Marcus Dillinger needs a girl like you.”

The heat was back in Mary Catherine’s cheeks. “How do you know what he—”

“Be right back.” Aspyn dusted her hands off on her jeans. “I’ll get us some water.”

Mary Catherine watched her go, confused. Aspyn said she didn’t really know Marcus, but then . . . how could she have known whether Shelly was right for him? And what would’ve made her say that last part about Marcus’s needing a girl like her? Mary Catherine could’ve been married for all Aspyn knew.

For a moment she watched Marcus and Shelly across the room. Marcus worked on the hoop and Shelly mostly flirted with him. Truthfully, Marcus didn’t really look interested.

After a few seconds, Marcus turned her way and their eyes met. Mary Catherine looked away, embarrassed at having been caught. What was she doing? Even if Marcus had been single, she wasn’t interested. He wasn’t her type. Besides, she had no time for love. Just as well that God didn’t bring along the sort of guy who could really turn her head.

Still, as Aspyn returned with their water, and as they worked on the boards, Mary Catherine couldn’t quite shake her new friend’s words. The idea that Marcus might actually need a girl like her. Or vice versa. The possibility defied her mind and filled her heart.

More than a couple of times she caught herself looking for him, watching the kind way he had with the volunteers, the humility in his eyes. Finally, she stopped herself and focused on the task at hand. She wasn’t going to waste the hours dreaming about a guy she could never have. Life was too short.

Especially hers.

Hoofstuk 6

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D

is net na drie toe Mary Catherine en Sami by die jeugsentrum aankom. Mary Catherine voel weer haar ou self, noudat sy uiteindelik haar geheim met Sami gedeel het. By hul woonstel het sy Sami laat belowe dat sy haar nie anders sou behandel nie.

‘Ek is nie sterwend nie,’ het sy gesê. ‘In elk geval, nog nie.’

‘Maar jy sal wees ... te gou.’

Mary Catherine het haar vinger in die lug gehou en haar kop geskud. ‘Nie een van ons weet wanneer ons tyd sal kom nie.’

Sami het oplaas belowe. ‘God wil hê ons moet elke dag voluit lewe, is dit wat jy vir my sê? Hy sal sorg vir die res?’

‘Ja. Presies.’

Sedertdien het hulle nie weer daaroor gepraat nie. Sami was ’n bietjie stiller as gewoonlik, maar nie so dat die ouens sou agterkom nie. Mary Catherine was bly die gesprek was agter die rug. Dit was moeilik om dit vir haar beste vriendin te vertel, maar sy wou hê Sami moet weet.

Nou stap hulle deur die drie basketbalbane na die Virginia Hutcheson-saal, die plek waar daar elke middag en aand ekstra klasse aangebied sal word. Vandag is die tafels egter teen die mure gerangskik vir die openingseremonie. Marcus is besig om ’n boks vol borde na een van die tafels toe te dra.

Mary Catherine voel dit weer – hoe haar sterwende hart skielik lewendig voel as hy in die rondte is. Sy maan haarself om haar emosies te beheer. Marcus is in elk geval nie geïnteresseerd in haar nie.

‘Sami!’ Tyler is aan die ander kant van die saal, besig om plastiekbekertjies uit te pak. Sy haas haar na hom toe.

Mary Catherine se oog vang Marcus s’n. Op daardie oomblik gaan die boks wat hy dra oop, en die borde begin stadig daaruit gly.

Sy spring om hom te gaan help en begin hulle optel. ‘Perfekte tydsberekening.’

‘Hm, so jy was doelbewus laat?’ Marcus sit die boks neer en help haar om die borde van die vloer af op te tel.

‘Laat?’ Mary Catherine hoop hy kan nie sien hoe rooi haar wange is nie. ‘Dis glad nie ín om betyds te wees nie. Jy behoort te weet.’

As Mary Catherine en Marcus hulle weer kom kry, terg hulle mekaar. Sarkasties en ’n bietjie koketterig. Lig, oppervlakkig. Die twee dra die boks saam na die tafel toe.

‘Grappies op ’n stokkie. Waar kan ek help?’ Mary Catherine hou haar stemtoon lig. Sy moes seker na die ander hoek toe gegaan het en Sami en Tyler gaan help het. Dis nie goed om naby Marcus te wees nie. Veral nie aangesien hy haar soos ’n magneet aantrek nie. En omdat sy voel asof al die lug uit die kamer wegraak as sy in sy teenwoordigheid is.

‘Ek moet nog ’n klompie tafels daar agter was.’ Hy knipoog vir haar. ‘Jy kan my help.’

Mary Catherine kyk oor haar skouer. ‘Ek dag die Waynes kom ook.’

‘Ja.’ Hy glimlag. ‘Hulle is nog meer ín – nog later as jy en Sami.’

Voordat hulle by die vuil tafels kan uitkom, verskyn Ollie Wayne, sy vrou en

Shelly in die vertrek. 'Hier is ons!' Rhonda loop voor. 'Reg om te help!' Mary Catherine staan dadelik terug. Sy sien hoe Shelly doelbewus op Marcus afpyl. Sy lyk soos 'n jagter wat sy prooi raakgesien het. Mary Catherine voel skielik gefrustreerd. *Moenie katterig wees nie*, maan sy haarself. *Jy het geen rede om jaloers te voel nie. Maak net dat jy wegkom.*

Toe Shelly by Marcus kom, onhels sy hom en soen hom op die mond. Marcus lyk verbaas, en lag 'n bietjie verleë. 'Nou ja, hallo daar.'

'Help kan baie dinge beteken, of hoe?' Shelly praat so hard dat almal haar hoor.

Mary Catherine het genoeg gehad.

Sy gaan na die tafel waar Rhonda Sami met die bekere help. Rhonda verduidelik dat hulle ses bokse vol waterbottels gebring het. 'Ek wil dit graag in die yskas sit.'

'Dis nog 'n projek vir vandag.' Tyler is besig om leë bekere nader te bring. 'Iemand het net 'n paar uur gelede ekstra yskaste geskenk.' Hy trek 'n gesig. 'Hulle werk, maar hulle is vieslik.'

'Wonderlik!' Rhonda klap haar hande opgewonde en kyk na Mary Catherine. 'Is jy reg vir operasie yskas skoonmaak?'

'Definitief!'

Op pad kombuis toe stel Rhonda haarself voor. 'Ek het al van jou gehoor. Sami kan nie ophou babbel oor hoe jy haar geleer het om voluit te lewe nie.' Rhonda glimlag. 'Jy is haar heldin.'

'Dis gaaf van haar.' Mary Catherine voel die kompliment tot diep in haar siel. Sy het glad nie geweet dat Sami ander mense van haar vertel nie. God is besig om haar te help om ander mense te leer om voluit te lewe – al is sy besig om dood te gaan. 'Ek hoor baie van julle gesin ook. Dit klink asof jul huis die plek is waar almal gaan kuier.'

'Marcus bly daar naby, en jy weet seker dat Tyler nou by hom bly. Hulle kom dikwels by ons eet, en dan begin hulle gewoonlik snoeker speel. Dit hou maklik tot middernag aan.'

Mary Catherine kan haar dit voorstel. Sami was al dikwels saam met Tyler daar. En blykbaar is Shelly ook gewoonlik daar. 'Daar is 'n huiskerk by julle, nie waar nie? Sami het so iets laat val.'

'Ja.' Hulle inspekteer die yskaste, en gaan soek dan emmers. 'Ons pastoor het onlangs afgetree, nou is ons gemeente in 'n oorgangstadium. Die personeel het ons aangemoedig om vir die volgende paar maande by ons huise bymekaar te kom. Die bure te nooi, daardie soort ding. Tyler en Sami kom nou al 'n rukkie lank na ons huiskerk toe.'

Rhonda grawe 'n paar lappe uit en hulle maak die emmers vol warm seepwater. 'Het jy 'n vaste gemeente?'

‘Ja, dis ’n uur se ry ver.’

‘Wel, hoekom kom jy nie môre na ons toe nie? Dit sal baie lekker wees as jy kan!’

Mary Catherine bedank die ouer vrou. Maar sy sal nie kan gaan nie. Nie as Shelly ook daar is en die hele tyd aan Marcus hang nie. Dit sal feitlik onmoontlik wees om onder sulke omstandighede op die Here te fokus. Buitendien is die uur lange rit na haar kerk goed vir haar. Dit gee haar tyd om te bid en te sing en haarself daaraan te herinner dat ware geluk net moontlik is as ’n mens dinge doen wat werklik saak maak.

Dinge soos hierdie.

Sy en Rhonda werk ’n uur lank aan die yskaste, tot al die swart swamme weg is. Hulle kry ’n blikkie bakpoeier in die spens, en ’n paar keer se afvee daarmee laat die yskaste selfs skoon ruik.

Deur die wassery gesels hulle oor gesinslewe en geloof, en hoe Rhonda en Ollie hulle huis op meer as een manier as ’n kerk sien. ‘Ons vra God om ons huis met Homself te vul, en Hy doen dit. Elke keer.’ Rhonda lag maklik. ‘Ek sê nie dit gaan nie soms woes om die etenstafel nie, maar dit is die moeite werd.’

Mary Catherine probeer om nie jaloers te voel nie. Dit klink na die soort huis wat sy nog altyd begeer het. In plaas daarvan was sy die enigste kind van welgestelde ouers. Ouers wat te besig was met hulle sosiale lewe en liefdadigheidsorganisasies om agter te kom hoe eensaam hul dogter is.

Miskien moet sy tog maar Rhonda se uitnodiging aanvaar en hul huiskerk bywoon. Sodra sy ophou om so hewig te reageer wanneer sy Marcus Dillinger sien. As dit ooit gebeur.

Toe die yskaste blink, gaan Rhonda en Mary Catherine terug na die ander in die saal. Daar is nou heelwat meer mense. Vrywilligers uit die omgewing maal rond en oral op die tafels is daar borde koekies en kolwyntjies. In ’n ander vertrek is die vrywilligers besig om speletjies op te stel en bakke vol eetgoed te maak.

Marcus en Tyler het aan alles gedink.

Mary Catherine kry Sami by een van die koektafels. Shelly help Ollie aan die ander kant van die vertrek. ‘Waar is Marcus?’

‘Die polisie wou met hom en Tyler praat.’ Sami klink nie juis bekommerd nie. ‘Seker net oor die logistiek van die aand. Hulle verwag ’n massa mense.’

Maar toe Marcus en Tyler ’n paar minute later hul verskyning maak, lyk hulle bekommerd. Tyler beduie Sami en Mary Catherine moet na hulle toe kom. ‘Ons moet met julle praat.’ Hy wys na die oorkant van die vertrek. ‘Mary Catherine, kan jy vir Rhonda en Ollie gaan haal? Hulle moet dit ook hoor.’

Iets is verkeerd. Mary Catherine voel dit aan. In hierdie deel van die stad kan

enigiets gebeur, en sy kan sien die ouens is baie bekommerd. Sy gaan haal die afrigter en sy vrou en hulle gaan saam na die klein vertrek toe.

Daar neem Marcus die leiding. 'Die polisie het ons gewaarsku.' Hy lyk besorg en gefrustreerd. 'Die twee grootste bendes van die gebied, die WestKnights en die EastTown Boyz, beplan 'n konfrontasie vir vanaand. Hier. Voor die jeugsentrum.'

Niemand sê 'n woord nie. Toe sê Ollie: 'Hulle behoort bystand aan te vra. Jy kan nie toelaat dat die bendes die aand vir almal bederf nie.'

'Dis maar hulle manier om verandering teen te staan.' Marcus pers sy lippe opmekaar. 'Altans, dit is wat die polisie sê.'

'Wel, dis nie reg nie.' Rhonda gaan staan langs haar man. 'Ek stem saam met Ollie. Kom ons vra ekstra polisie aan. Tot die bendes agterkom dis nie 'n goeie plek vir hulle nie.'

Sami staan langs Tyler. Sy lyk bang. 'Moet ons nie die hele ding afstel nie? Ons kan dit mos uitstel na volgende week, of hoe? Laat die polisie dit uitsorteer en dan probeer ons weer as die bendes ons nie meer bedreig nie.'

'Ons kan dit nie doen nie.' Mary Catherine praat voordat sy die woorde kan keer. 'Ons moet bid. God sal ons bewaar. Ons moet Hom net vra.'

Marcus kyk na haar en sy oë versag. 'Ek hou van jou voorstel.' Hy hou sy hande na die ander toe uit. 'Kom ons bid. Die polisie sal voor waghou, en hier binne sal ons eenvoudig die kinders wat by die deur inkom, met liefde oorlaai.'

Daar is 'n kort bespreking oor die moontlikheid om die seremonie uit te stel, maar uiteindelik stem almal saam dat hulle moet voortgaan en om beskerming moet bid. God is by hulle. Wie kan teen hulle wees? Toe hulle 'n kringetjie maak, besef Mary Catherine te laat dat sy langs Marcus staan. Hy neem haar hand, en fluister: 'Dankie.'

Sy glimlag en knik effens.

Toe gebeur dit. Sy hand sluit om hare, sy vingers warm en sterk. Dit voel bekend en slaan tegelykertyd haar asem weg. *Liewe Here, help my om te dink. Help my hart om te bedaar. Asseblief.*

Ollie is besig om te bid. Hy vra God om sy beskerming, vra dat hy sy engele om die gebou sal plaas om hulle vanaand veilig te hou tydens die openingseremonie.

Mary Catherine kan skaars konsentreer. Aan die einde van die gebed gee Marcus haar hand 'n drukkie. Hy glimlag vir haar. 'Ernstig nou. Dankie.' Hy gee 'n kort laggie. 'Ek kan nie glo niemand anders het daaraan gedink om te bid nie.'

'Dis niks, wat.' Sy moet hier wegkom. Om vir hom te val gaan beslis nie goed wees vir haar nie. 'Ek wil net gou gaan kyk wat in die spelekamer aangaan.'

‘Reg so.’ Dit lyk asof hy haar wil vra om langer te bly. Maar toe draai hy na Ollie en sy vrou.

Mary Catherine verdwyn so vinnig as wat sy kan. In die spelekamer kry sy ’n nuwe vrywilliger, ’n slanke jong swart vrou wat blykbaar alleen gekom het. Mary Catherine gaan na haar toe. ‘Hallo. Ek is Mary Catherine.’

‘Hallo.’ Die vrou steek haar hand uit. ‘Ek is ’n ouer van die buurt. Aspyn. Gedink julle sal dalk hulp nodig hê.’

‘Aspyn. Dis ’n mooi naam.’ Mary Catherine kyk op haar horlosie. Dit is amper vyfuur, en die pizzas sal binne ’n uur afgelewer word. ‘Kom ons werk ’n bietjie by die mieliestronk-speletjies daar anderkant.’

Hulle gaan na die plek waar die borde vir die teikengooi-speletjie opgestel moet word. Iemand het instruksies daarby gelaat, en die twee vroue spring aan die werk. ‘Hoe lank woon jy al hier?’

‘Nie lank nie.’ Aspyn glimlag. Sy het die mooiste groen oë. Iets aan haar lyk amper bo-aards. ‘Ek het gedink ek kan net sowel inspring en begin help.’

‘Ken jy vir Marcus?’

‘Nie goed nie.’ Aspyn glimlag. ‘Ek weet darem hy speel bofbal.’

‘Ja. Dit doen hy.’ Die twee lag en Mary Catherine is bly sy het ’n nuwe persoon gevind om mee te gesels.

Aan die ander kant van die vertrek is Marcus en Shelly besig om ’n klein basketbalkorf op te stel. Mary Catherine probeer om nie te kyk nie, maar dis onmoontlik. Die meisiekind het haarself al weer om Marcus gedrapeer.

Aspyn let dit ook op. Sy kyk na hulle en toe na Mary Catherine. ‘Sy is nie sy tipe nie.’

‘Wat? Wie?’ Mary Catherine is nie seker sy verstaan haar nuwe vriendin reg nie.

‘Shelly Wayne. Sy is te jonk. Sy moet nog grootword.’ Aspyn glimlag. ‘As jy my vra, het Marcus Dillinger ’n meisie soos jy nodig.’

Mary Catherine se wange is bloedrooi. ‘Hoe weet jy wat hy ...’

‘Ek is nou terug.’ Aspyn vee haar hande aan haar jeans af. ‘Ek wil vir ons gaan water haal.’

Mary Catherine kyk haar agterna. Sy voel ’n bietjie verward. Aspyn het gesê sy ken nie vir Marcus nie, maar toe ... hoe kan sy weet of Shelly die regte meisie vir hom is? En wat het haar laat sê dat Marcus iemand soos sy nodig het? Vir al wat Aspyn weet, kan Mary Catherine getroud wees.

Sy kyk ’n oomblik lank na Marcus en Shelly. Marcus werk aan die korf, en Shelly flankeer met hom. En dit lyk sowaar nie asof Marcus geïnteresseerd is nie.

Na ’n paar sekondes draai Marcus sy kop en vang haar oog. Mary Catherine kyk weg, verleë omdat sy uitgevang is. Wat doen sy? Selfs al het Marcus nie

'n meisie gehad nie, stel sy nie belang nie. Hy is nie haar tipe nie. En buitendien het sy nie tyd vir 'n verhouding of liefde nie. Dis ook maar goed die Here het nie die soort ou op wie sy verlief kan raak, oor haar pad gebring nie.

Maar toe Aspyn terugkom met hul water en hulle verder aan die mieliestronkborde werk, bly haar nuwe vriendin se woorde in Mary Catherine se kop maal. Om te dink dat Marcus 'n meisie soos sy kan nodig hê. En andersom. Dit kan nooit wees nie, maar die gedagte bring 'n warm gevoel in haar hart.

Meer as een keer vang sy haarself dat sy na hom kyk. Sy let op hoe geduldig en vriendelik hy met die vrywilligers werk, hoe nederig hy is. Maar later kry sy dit reg om hom uit haar gedagtes te weer en op haar taak te konsentreer. Sy gaan nie haar tyd mors deur oor 'n ou te droom wat sy nooit sal kan kry nie. Die lewe is te kort.

Veral hare.

7



LEXY SAT IN DWAYNE'S passenger seat, once more slumped down in the shadows. They were parked half a block down from the new youth center.

Any minute Marcus Dillinger was going to walk outside and get the pizza. That was the big draw tonight. Free pizza. Lexy felt sick to her stomach. She wanted to be Dwayne's girl. Wanted her spot beside him. But she didn't want Dwayne to shoot the Dodgers' pitcher. *Don't come outside, Marcus.* Lexy silently begged the baseball star. *Stay inside.*

Beside her Dwayne tugged at his baseball cap. He had one hand on the wheel, the other on his loaded revolver.

Lexy didn't dare say a thing. She looked at her shaking fingers. She looked toward the youth center. If only she could defy Dwayne, take a stand for herself. Find her own way. But she couldn't. Being Dwayne's girl was the biggest thing that had ever happened to her.

Lexy thought about the rest of the guys in the gang. The WestKnights were on a drug run tonight. At least they were supposed to be. Dwayne made a call.

His words were short, but Lexy got the idea. The gangs were going to fight in the alley across from the center. Dwayne needed to kill one of them before he could take a shot at Marcus.

Her teeth began to chatter. So many rules. She wanted to open the door and throw up. What if they got caught? And why did Marcus Dillinger have to die? He was only here because he wanted to be nice. She kept her mouth shut and waited.

Dwayne had shaved his head. He didn't look as hot now. His face was meaner. Scarier. Beneath his baseball cap he had a blue bandana around his forehead. He told her he had to look the part. More gang leader than gang boy.

Five minutes passed, then ten. Dwayne made another call. If the EastTown Boyz didn't show, the killing was off. When the call ended, a pizza delivery car pulled up in front of the youth center. Dwayne started the car and pulled out onto the street.

No! Not Marcus. Lexy put her hand over her eyes. This was terrible. She couldn't watch. Through the cracks in her fingers she saw Dwayne drive slowly up to the youth center. So far no one was coming out for the pizza.

Through the windows they could see kids playing basketball and what looked like maybe carnival games. For a moment Lexy wondered what it would be like to be inside. Playing games. Being a kid.

Dwayne laughed, and the sound rumbled deep in his throat.

Lexy stared at him and then looked down at her lap. What was so funny? Had he seen Marcus? Was the baseball player about to come outside? How could he laugh at killing Marcus Dillinger?

Dwayne hit the steering wheel. He looked down the alley, down the street. Suddenly Lexy realized something. The EastTown Boyz were nowhere to be seen. At the last second Dwayne sped up and squealed down the street. If the EastTown Boyz weren't going to show up, the fight would happen another night. She had never been so scared in all her life but now Lexy felt like she could breathe again.

Later, back at her grandmother's house, Lexy sat alone in the dark. Just sat there staring at the picture of Jesus on the wall. She sort of wanted to wake her grandma up and tell her what had almost happened. What was about to happen. Maybe her grandma would have some advice. Some way she could get out of this crazy life.

Last thing Dwayne had told her before she got out still made her feel sick. He told her he was still going to kill Marcus. But more than that, he would kill her if she said anything. If she told anyone what he was about to do.

Lexy clenched her teeth.

For a year all she had wanted was to be Dwayne's girl. But now she was

afraid of him. Like for real. She couldn't tell her grandma. The woman was old. She still missed Lexy's mom every day. Her grandma would be so disappointed if she knew Lexy had joined the gang.

No, there was no one to talk to. Nowhere to turn. She needed to go to bed. There was only one reason she could bring herself to walk to her bedroom and fall into her bed.

Marcus Dillinger had not been killed.

Not tonight, anyway.



JAG WAS A police officer again, all six feet five inches of him. His blond hair framed his face, but it did nothing to lessen the fierce look in his eyes. He had distracted the EastTown Boyz, kept them away from the youth center. Now he shouted just once at them. "Leave!"

The EastTown Boyz—twenty or so of them—sauntered into a cluster. One of them pointed a gun at Jag and laughed. "You talking to us, pig?"

Jag knew how to respond in a situation like this. The kids were just that—kids. They weren't the ones at fault. This was all they knew. It was all their parents knew, and their parents before them. The kids gathered before him were not the enemy.

But all Jag could see was the gun. The same type of gun the hit men had used against Officer Terrance Williams. He felt fire in his veins. Without a single hesitation he walked toward the gang members. "I said leave!" He boomed the words like so many gunshots.

"We ain't 'fraid you, man!" One of the guys flashed a gang sign at Jag, taunting him. Another fired his gun toward the sky.

"Hear that, big guy? That's you if you come another step closer."

Jag kept walking. "You will leave this place in the name of Jesus."

The guy with the gun aimed it at Jag.

"I said leave! In the name of Jesus!"

The one with the gun waved it in the air. "We don't care about your Jesus." He aimed the gun again. "You're dead, pig. Don't come any closer."

Jag had taken enough.

In a fraction of a second he disappeared and reappeared at the opposite side of the alley.

The EastTown Boyz shouted expletives, turning this way and that looking for him. "How'd he do that?"

"You see that, man? He disappeared!"

"Yeah . . . like a ghost."

Jag appeared again, this time a few feet from the guys. With a voice that

echoed through the alleyway, Jag shouted, “I . . . said . . . leave!”

The guy with the gun aimed again. “That’s messed up, man.” His hand was shaking. “No one plays with the EastTown Boyz.”

Jag simply put his hands on his hips and stood there, legs a few feet apart. “Go home.”

This time his booming voice made the boys back up, slowly at first and then faster until finally they took off running.

Jag felt the deepest sense of satisfaction. He hated violence, hated the way the sons of Adam loved to hurt each other.

They aren’t the problem, he told himself. But they felt like the problem. They felt like the enemy, if Jag were honest with himself. He searched the alleyway. The demons were gone. They had scattered with the gang. Now that he was alone, Jag exhaled. For today, he was successful. He felt the unfamiliar adrenaline rush, the feeling that only came when angels were in human form. And something else, something angels weren’t supposed to feel. Something he would have to pray about if he were to be successful in this mission.

The feeling was rage.

Hoofstuk 7

~

L

exy sit langs Dwayne op die passasiersitplek, weer laag en weggesteek in die skemer van die motor se binnekant. Hulle is ’n halwe blok van die ingang van die splinternuwe jeugsentrum.

Marcus Dillinger kan nou enige oomblik uitkom om die pizza te ontvang. Dit is die groot trekpleister vanaand. Gratis pizza. Lexy voel naar. Sy wil Dwayne se meisie wees. Sy wil aan hom behoort. Maar sy wil nie hê Dwayne moet die Dodgers se gooier skiet nie. *Moenie uitkom nie, Marcus*, smeeek sy die bofbalspeler in die stilligheid. *Bly daar binne*.

Langs haar pluk-pluk Dwayne aan sy bofbalpet. Sy een hand is op die stuurwiel, die ander hou ’n gelaaide pistool vas.

Lexy waag dit nie om ’n woord te sê nie. Sy kyk af na haar bewende vingers. Sy kyk na die jeugsentrum. As sy dit net kon regkry om Dwayne te trotseer, standpunt in te neem. Haar eie weg te vind. Maar sy kan nie. Om Dwayne se meisie te wees, is die beste ding wat nog met haar gebeur het.

Lexy dink aan die ander ouens in die bende. Die WestKnights wil vanaand dwelms in die hande kry. Of altans, dit was die oorspronklike plan. Dwayne het gebel. Dit was 'n kort oproep, maar Lexy kon agterkom wat aan die gang is. Die bendes gaan in die stegie oorkant die sentrum baklei. Dwayne moet een van hulle uithaal voordat hy Marcus kan skiet.

Haar tande klapper op mekaar. So baie reëls. Sy wil die deur oopmaak en opgooi. Sê nou hulle word gevang? En waarom moet Marcus Dillinger doodgemaak word? Hy is net daar omdat hy gaaf is. Maar sy bly stil en wag.

Dwayne het sy groot *afro* afgeskeer. Hy lyk nou nie meer so aantreklik soos voorheen nie. Sy gesig lyk gemeen. Dit maak haar bang. Onder sy bofbalpet is daar 'n blou band om sy voorkop. Hy het gesê hy moet soos 'n leier lyk. Nie soos 'n gewone bendelid nie.

Vyf minute gaan verby. Nog vyf. Dwayne bel weer. As die EastTown Boyz nie opdaag nie, is die skietery af. Toe hy die oproep beëindig, hou die pizza-waentjie voor die jeugsentrum stil. Dwayne sit die kar aan die gang en beweeg die straat in.

Nee! Nie Marcus nie. Lexy sit haar hande voor haar oë. Dit is verskriklik. Sy kan nie kyk nie. Maar sy moet. Deur haar vingers sien sy hoe Dwayne stadig na die jeugsentrum toe ry. Tot dusver het niemand nog die pizza kom haal nie. Deur die vensters sien sy hoe die kinders basketbal en ander speletjies speel. Skielik wonder sy hoe dit sal wees om daar binne te wees. Speletjies te speel. Net jonk te wees.

Dwayne lag, 'n geluid wat diep uit sy keel kom.

Lexy staar hom aan en kyk dan af na haar skoot. Wat is so snaaks? Het hy Marcus gesien? Is die bofbalspeler daar buite? Hoe kan hy lag as hy Marcus Dillinger gaan doodmaak?

Dwayne slaan teen die stuurwiel. Hy kyk by die stegie in, en dan straat af. Skielik besef Lexy wat dit is. Die EastTown Boyz is nêrens te sien nie. Dwayne versnel skielik. As die EastTown Boyz nie opdaag nie, is die geveg uitgestel tot 'n ander aand. Sy was nog nooit in haar hele lewe so bang soos netnou nie, maar nou voel Lexy dat sy weer kan begin asemhaal.

Later die aand by haar ouma se huis sit Lexy alleen in die donker. Sit net daar en staar na 'n prent van Jesus teen die muur. Sy wil eintlik haar ouma wakker maak en vir haar vertel wat amper gebeur het. Wat nog gaan gebeur. Miskien het haar ouma raad vir haar. 'n Manier om los te kom van hierdie vreeslike lewe.

Die laaste ding wat Dwayne gesê het toe hy haar aflaai, laat haar nog altyd naar voel. Hy het gesê hy gaan nog steeds vir Marcus doodmaak. En daarby dat hy haar gaan doodmaak as sy iets daaroor sê. As sy iemand vertel wat hy gaan doen.

Lexy byt op haar tande.

'n Hele jaar lank wou sy Dwayne se meisie wees. Maar nou is sy bang vir hom. Regtig bang. Sy kan nie haar ouma vertel nie. Haar ouma is oud. Sy mis Lexy se ma nog elke dag. Haar ouma sal so teleurgesteld wees as sy moet weet Lexy is in 'n bende.

Nee, daar is niemand om mee te praat nie. Nêrens om heen te gaan nie. Sy moet liever gaan slaap. Daar is net een rede waarom sy haarself sover kan kry om na haar kamer toe te gaan en op haar bed neer te val.

Marcus Dillinger is nie doodgemaak nie.

Ten minste nie vanaand nie.

~

Jag is weer 'n polisieman, 'n twee meter lange polisieman. Sy blonde hare omraam sy gesig, maar laat hom nie minder dreigend lyk nie. Hy het die EastTown Boyz se aandag afgelei, hulle weggehou van die jeugsentrum af. Nou roep hy weer na hulle toe: 'Maak dat julle wegkom!'

Die EastTown Boyz – so twintig man sterk – drom in 'n groepie saam. Een van hulle rig 'n wapen op Jag en lag. 'Praat jy met ons, my ou?'

Jag weet hoe om in so 'n situasie te reageer. Die kinders is presies dit – kinders. Hulle is nie die eintlike skuldiges nie. Dit is die enigste wêreld wat hulle ken. Al wat hulle ouers ken, en hulle grootouers voor hulle. Die kinders wat voor hom staan, is nie die ware vyand nie.

Maar al wat Jag sien, is die wapen. Dieselfde tipe as wat die sluipskutters gebruik het om Terrance Williams mee dood te skiet. Hy voel die vuur in sy are. Sonder huiwering loop hy na die bendelede toe. 'Ek het gesê: Weg is julle!' bulder hy, elke woord soos 'n pistoolskoot.

'Ons is nie bang vir jou nie, man!' Een van die ouens maak 'n bendeteken na Jag se kant toe, tart hom. 'n Ander een vuur 'n skoot die lug in.

'Hoor jy, ou? Die volgende een is vir jou as jy 'n tree nader kom.'

Jag hou aan loop. 'Julle sal nou hier weggaan, in die Naam van Jesus.'

Die seun met die wapen korrel na Jag.

'Ek het gesê: Gaan weg. In die Naam van Jesus!'

Die een met die wapen swaai dit in die lug. 'Ons is nie gepla met jou Jesus nie.' Hy mik weer na Jag. 'Jy is dood, man. Gee net een tree.'

Maar Jag het genoeg gehad.

In 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde het hy verdwyn en weer aan die ander kant van die stegie verskyn.

Die EastTown Boyz vloek en raas, en draai rond op soek na hom. 'Hoe't hy dit gedoen?'

'Het jy gesien? Hy het verdwyn!'

‘Ja ... soos ’n spook.’

Jag verskyn weer, hierdie keer ’n paar tree van die manne af. Afgemete sê hy: ‘Ek het gesê ... maak – dat – julle – wegkom.’

Die jong man met die wapen mik weer na hom. ‘Jy’s nie lekker nie, man.’ Sy hand bewe. ‘Niemand speel met die EastTown Boyz nie.’

Jag staan net daar, hande in die sye, voete uitmekaar. ‘Gaan huis toe.’

Hierdie keer laat sy stem die ouens terugtree, eers stadig en toe al vinniger, tot hulle uiteindelik begin hardloop.

Jag voel diep tevrede. Hy haat geweld, haat die manier waarop die seuns van Adam mekaar seermaak.

Hulle is nie die probleem nie, dink hy weer. Maar dit voel asof hulle die probleem is. Hulle voel soos die vyand, as Jag heeltemal eerlik moet wees. Hy soek deur die stegie. Die demone is ook weg. Hulle het saam met die bende die loop geneem. Noudat hy alleen is, haal Jag ’n paar keer diep asem. Vandag was hy suksesvol. Hy voel die adrenaliengolf, iets wat engele net ervaar wanneer hulle ’n menslike vorm aanneem. En nog iets, iets wat engele nie veronderstel is om te voel nie. Iets waaroor hy sal moet bid as hy met hierdie missie wil slaag.

Woede.

8



MARCUS LOOKED AROUND THE packed youth center and silently thanked God for the success and safety of the night. Everything had gone perfectly. Whatever gang violence was supposed to materialize, it hadn’t happened yet. In fact, the whole night had been one unforgettable series of amazing moments.

And it had all started with Mary Catherine’s suggestion that they pray.

He hadn’t talked to her since then. Of course, Shelly hadn’t left his side once, so he didn’t blame Mary Catherine for keeping her distance. Still, he had seen her look his way a couple of times throughout the night.

The girl intrigued him.

She didn’t care what anyone thought. Her allegiance was to God and her friends and helping others. There wasn’t an ounce of pretense or showiness—

qualities that practically defined Shelly.

The night was winding down, and he stood in a corner of one of the basketball courts signing autographs for the kids. Across the room, Mary Catherine read to the littler kids. Everything about her was real and genuine. The way she laughed and held the hands of the toddlers.

A woman came up next in line. She had a small boy with her. "Hi." She seemed shy. "My name's Shamika."

"Hi, Shamika." Marcus smiled at her. He was signing press photos of himself pitching. He picked one up and stooped down eye level with the boy. "What's your name?"

"Jalen." The boy grinned. "My mom says you're a hero."

Marcus gave the boy's mother a quick smile. "Well, I think the real hero is your mama. She takes care of you, right?"

"Yeah." The boy giggled. "Seems funny having a mama for a hero."

"Not at all. My mom and dad are my heroes." Marcus held the photo up. "Want me to sign it to you?"

"Yeah." Jalen grinned.

" 'Yes, please.' " His mother put her hand on the boy's shoulder. "Use your manners, Jalen."

"Sorry." He looked down for a beat and then back at Marcus. "Yes, please."

Before they left, Shamika looked deep into Marcus's eyes. "We're about to be kicked out of our apartment." She kept her voice low. "I need another job and no one's hiring." She looked down at Jalen. "I'm all he has. So maybe . . . would you pray for us?"

"Of course." Marcus had never been asked to pray out loud before. He wasn't even sure he could manage it. But he had to try. Coach Wayne prayed out loud all the time. Just talking to Jesus, that's what Coach said. Marcus put one hand on Shamika's shoulder and the other on Jalen's. "Dear God, I know You're here and I know You're listening. Could You please help my friend Shamika? She's up against it pretty bad, and she loves her boy so much. If You could just give them a reason to believe again. The way You did for me. Thanks, God. Amen."

Shamika had tears in her eyes. "That's why I came here tonight. So I could see for myself that someone like you really exists." She looked around. "Thank you. For doing this for all of us. And thanks for praying."

She leaned in and gave Marcus a quick hug. "At least now I know you're real and not some imaginary angel."

Marcus watched Shamika and Jalen head toward the junior basketball hoop. The image of the two stayed with him as he finished signing autographs

and as he took the microphone and thanked everyone for coming. More than two hundred people had stayed for this moment. They gathered around, their attention on him. Most of the adults looked despondent. Defiance flashed in the eyes of half the teens.

Marcus understood. They had come out of curiosity, hopeful for free pizza and candy and wondering what sort of difference a pro ballplayer could ever make on streets this rough.

He held up the mic and took a slow breath. "Good evening. Thanks for being here. For sharing in our grand opening." He looked at the back of the room to Tyler and Sami, the Waynes and Mary Catherine. "A special thanks to my friends, who have been here most of the day."

The crowd was quiet, shifty. "You gonna have free pizza next week?" one of the teens yelled out.

"Maybe." Marcus felt himself relax. "In life, you gotta have vision, man. If your vision is free pizza every week, then talk to me after. Maybe we can figure out a way to make it happen. Do a little fundraising."

A nod came from the teen and his eyes showed something he didn't have when he blurted out his question.

Respect.

Marcus looked around the room. "That goes for all of you. We all have to want something better for ourselves. Better than kids joining gangs and dropping out of school. Police tell me half the kids on these streets don't live to be twenty-one. That's insane." He felt the passion in his voice. "You gotta have a bigger vision if you're going to have a different life."

He talked a little about his own vision, how he pictured kids coming to the youth center after school and getting help with their studies. "I'd like to have counselors here, too. You got problems, you should have someone to talk to."

His speech was winding down, and really he had just one thing left. "Six months ago my life didn't have meaning. Sure, I play for the Dodgers. Pro ballplayer with the big contract. But that doesn't give a man meaning."

The kids were listening.

"I gave God a challenge. Told Him I'd believe if He would give my life meaning. Something that lasted. And guess what? God did exactly that. So now I give that challenge to you." Again his tone picked up intensity. "Every one of you. A youth center isn't a reason to live. God's the only one who can give us that. So tonight before you hit your pillow, talk to Him. Ask Him to give your life meaning." Marcus took off his baseball cap. "Pray with me."

Then, for the second time in his life, Marcus Dillinger prayed out loud. He could hardly believe it, but he was getting the hang of this. He asked God to bless the people there that night and to bless the efforts of the youth center.

“We need a purpose, God. So give it to us. Make us a community. Thanks for tonight, God. Amen.”

When he was finished, the crowd gradually dispersed. Several parents came up and thanked him for his commitment to the center and the community. The teens mostly kept to themselves. Marcus wondered how many of them were already in one of the local gangs.

The volunteers stayed to clean up. Most of the games had been borrowed from a local church, and plates of the leftover food had to be wrapped up and saved for whatever kids would come by the center in the coming week.

Marcus and Tyler were washing down tables when Sami and Mary Catherine found them. “We wiped down the water coolers.” Sami brushed her hands together. “You guys must be exhausted.”

“Exhausted, but happy.” Marcus shot a smile at Mary Catherine. “That idea of yours . . . that we all pray before everyone got here? It was the perfect choice.” He looked at Tyler. “Ty was saying he could almost feel the hand of God over this place. Like we had divine protection.”

Mary Catherine smiled, but she looked more at Tyler and Sami than at Marcus. “Prayer makes a difference.”

Marcus thought about Shamika and little Jalen, and then the talk with the people at the end. He aimed his next words at Mary Catherine again. “You’ve made me a believer.”

She didn’t seem to know what to say. Instead of responding to Marcus she turned to Tyler. “Where’s the Wayne family? I didn’t see them leave.”

“They needed to get back to their kids.” Marcus looked at Mary Catherine, but she wouldn’t make eye contact with him. “They invited us back to the house for coffee whenever we’re finished.”

“What about Shelly?” Sami looked at Marcus. “She didn’t say goodbye.”

“She had plans with her friends.” Marcus wanted a moment alone with Mary Catherine. Why was she acting like this? Like she didn’t want to talk to him? “Anyway, we’re almost done here.”

He was about to ask her to join them for coffee back at the Waynes’ house when Officer Kent walked through the door. He stopped when he saw the group. “Marcus, you got a minute?”

“We can talk here. My friends know about the gang stuff.”

“Okay.” He came closer. “Something happened tonight I can’t really explain. We learned the fight here was supposed to be a big one. We had a few leads that everyone was talking about it. Supposed to have been a few killings, as well.”

“That’s what I told them.” Marcus turned his eyes to Mary Catherine again. “But then my friend MC here, she suggested we pray.” He looked back

at the officer. "I'd say God answered our prayers."

Officer Kent ran his hand over his dark hair. "Definitely." He paused. "Apparently some officer from another precinct showed up in the alley where the EastTown Boyz were gathered. Just one guy. By himself. No backup. No one knows who he was." He hesitated again. "Anyway, whatever went on between the officer and the gang, the boys came running out of the alley like they were being chased by a pack of Dobermans."

Marcus chuckled. "I like that picture."

"He was probably an angel." Mary Catherine looked serious, the light in her eyes brighter than before. "They're real, you know."

Officer Kent shrugged. "After tonight I'd believe anything." He nodded to the group. "Be careful leaving. We'll be outside until you go." He looked around. "I'd say tonight was a huge success. Keep up the good work."

When they finished cleaning, Marcus asked the others back to the Waynes' house for coffee. It was after ten o'clock, but he still wanted to be with them, maybe share stories from the night.

"You coming, too?" Marcus walked next to Mary Catherine as they headed out to their cars.

"I think so. I really liked Rhonda Wayne."

"She's everybody's mama." Marcus grinned and as they reached their cars, he waved once. "See you there."

Tyler drove with Marcus. When they were on the freeway headed to Silver Lake, Marcus looked at his friend. "What do you think of Mary Catherine?"

"Sami's friend?" Tyler turned so he could see Marcus better. "I thought you were into Shelly."

"I was. I mean, I am . . . sort of." He narrowed his eyes, his attention on the freeway ahead of them. "Mary Catherine . . . she's different. You know what I'm saying."

"She's one of a kind. That's for sure."

"Exactly. I got that tonight." He glanced at Tyler. "What do you think of her?"

"Mary Catherine?" Tyler smiled. "She's crazy and fun and full of life."

"She has beautiful hair." Marcus heard the distraction in his voice.

Tyler raised his brow. "Not that you're interested."

"I like her spirit." Marcus could still see her, the way she looked tonight surrounded by the younger children. "The girl loves God more than anything or anyone."

"That she does." Tyler smiled. "Sami says Mary Catherine's the real deal."

"Yeah." Marcus felt his laughter die off. "Maybe that's it."

The conversation switched to spring training and the fact that pitchers,

catchers, and pitching coaches had to report earlier than everyone else. Marcus didn't bring up Mary Catherine again the rest of the ride, but he was glad Tyler did most of the talking. It was all Marcus could do to stay partly interested. His mind was too preoccupied with the one thing he couldn't stop thinking about.

The light in Mary Catherine's eyes.

And the fact that in a few minutes he would see her again.



JAG AND ASPYN watched from the back of Marcus's Hummer as he headed back to Silver Lake. They were exhausted, but they weren't about to leave Marcus. Not with so much at stake.

Jag felt the strength of God fill him, renew him. "We succeeded tonight."

"Yes." She gave him a concerned look. "You were angry, Jag. I could feel it when we met up at the youth center."

"Of course I was angry." He was calmer now. "Those kids wanted to kill someone. There's enough killing on earth without kids killing each other."

"It was more than that." Aspyr had an uncanny way of reading other angels. Him in particular. The skill made her a great partner, but a meddlesome one at the same time.

There was no getting around the truth. Angels were honest. Period. "One of them pulled a gun on me. Same kind of gun the hit men used when . . ."

"Terrance Williams died." Aspyr's tone was rich with sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"This . . . rage. It came over me." Jag was completely himself again, full of peace and purpose. "I've only felt that one other time. In the minutes after Officer Williams was shot." He could barely describe it.

"I understand." She touched his shoulder. "Just be careful, Jag. Anger does not bring about the righteousness God desires. You know that."

"Yes."

"This is only the beginning. Things will get rough again on Tuesday night."

"I know. I need to be in control." Jag nodded. He appreciated Aspyr's wisdom.

"Exactly."

Jag pictured the gang gathered in the alley, the way they taunted him and flashed the gun at him. He let the images disappear from his mind. "Thank you, Aspyr. I'll be ready."

He had a feeling Aspyr was right. The worst of the violence was days away.

Hoofstuk 8

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M

arcus kyk in die volgepakte jeugsentrum rond en dank God vir die aand se sukses en hul veiligheid. Alles het wonderlik goed afgeloop. En van die verwagte bendegegeweld het niks gekom nie, altans, nog nie. Die hele aand was trouens 'n reeks onvergeetlike oomblikke.

En dit het begin met Mary Catherine se voorstel dat hulle bid.

Hy het nog nie weer met haar gesels nie. Shelly het natuurlik nooit sy sy verlaat nie, en hy kan verstaan waarom Mary Catherine haar skaars gehou het. Hy het nogtans 'n paar keer deur die loop van die aand gesien dat sy na sy kant toe kyk.

Die meisiekind interesseer hom.

Sy gee nie om wat ander mense dink nie. Sy is verbind tot God en haar vriende en naastediens. Daar is nie 'n gram voorgee of vertoon in haar nie – die eienskappe waarvan Shelly feitlik aanmekeer gesit is.

Die aand is stadig besig om tot 'n einde te kom, en hy staan op een van die basketbalbane, waar hy geduldig sy handtekening vir 'n ry kinders gee. Aan die oorkant van die kamer is Mary Catherine nog besig om vir die heel kleintjies stories te lees. Alles aan haar is eg. Haar lag. Die manier waarop sy die kleuters se hande vashou.

'n Vrou verskyn voor hom. By haar is 'n klein seuntjie. 'Hallo.' Sy lyk skaam. 'My naam is Shamika.'

'Hallo, Shamika.' Marcus glimlag vir haar. Voor hom lê 'n stapel foto's van hom waar hy besig is om te gooi. Hy tel 'n foto op en buk tot sy oë gelyk met die seuntjie s'n is. 'En wat is jou naam?'

'Jalen.' Die seun glimlag. 'My ma sê jy is 'n held.'

Marcus kyk glimlaggend op na die vrou. 'Wel, ek dink jou ma is die eintlike held. Sy sorg mos vir jou, of hoe?'

'Ja.' Die kind lag 'n bietjie. 'n Mens se ma is nie 'n held nie, man.'

'O ja, hulle is. My ma en my pa is my helde.' Marcus wys hom die foto. 'Wil jy hê ek moet dit vir jou teken?'

'Ja.' Jalen glimlag.

'Ja, asseblief.' Sy ma sit haar hand op haar seun se skouer. 'Onthou jou maniere, Jalen.'

“Skies.” Hy kyk af en toe weer op na Marcus. ‘Ja, asseblief.’

Voordat hulle wegstap, kyk Shamika diep in Marcus se oë. ‘Hulle wil ons by die woonstel uitskop.’ Sy praat sag. ‘Ek het nog ’n werk nodig, maar werk is onverkrygbaar.’ Sy kyk af na Jalen. ‘Ek is al wat hy het. Sal jy ... dink jy jy kan vir ons bid?’

‘Natuurlik.’ Niemand het Marcus nog ooit gevra om hardop te bid nie. Hy is glad nie seker of hy dit kan doen nie. Maar hy moet probeer. Hul afrigter, Ollie Wayne, bid gereeld hardop. ’n Mens praat net met Jesus, sê hy. Marcus sit een hand op Shamika se skouer en die ander op Jalen s’n. ‘Liewe Here, ek weet U is hier en U hoor ons. Help asseblief my vriendin Shamika. Hulle het groot probleme, en sy is baie lief vir haar seun. Gee asseblief vir haar ’n rede om weer hoop te hê. Soos U vir my gegee het. Dankie, Here. Amen.’

Daar is trane in Shamika se oë. ‘Dit is waarom ek vanaand gekom het. Sodat ek self kon sien of daar regtig nog mense soos jy is.’ Sy kyk om haar rond. ‘Dankie. Dankie dat jy dit vir ons almal doen. En dankie vir jou gebed.’

Sy gee Marcus ’n vinnige drukkie. ‘Nou weet ek ten minste jy is werklik, nie ’n denkbeeldige engel nie!’

Marcus kyk hoe Shamika en Jalen na die laerskoolkinders se basketbalbaan toe stap. Die beeld van die twee bly hom by terwyl hy die laaste handtekeninge uitdeel en dan die mikrofoon neem om almal te bedank. Daar is nog meer as twee honderd mense. Hulle kom staan om hom, hul aandag op hom. Die meeste volwassenes lyk ’n bietjie moedeloos. Die tieners lyk uitdagend.

Marcus verstaan. Hulle het gekom omdat hulle nuuskierig was, vir die gratis pizza en ander eetgoed, en omdat hulle wonder watter verskil ’n bofbalspeler nou eintlik in hierdie wettelose buurt kan maak.

Hy haal ’n slag diep asem en skakel die mikrofoon aan. ‘Goeienaand, almal. Dankie dat julle gekom het en deel was van ons openingsaand.’ Hy kyk na die mense wat agter staan, Tyler en Sami, die Waynes en Mary Catherine. “’n Speciale dankie aan my vriende, wat omtrent die hele dag hier was om te help.’

Die mense is stil, maar onrustig. ‘Gaan daar weer volgende week pizza wees?’ skree een van die tieners.

‘Miskien.’ Marcus kan voel hoe hy ontspan. “’n Mens moet visie in die lewe hê. As jou visie gratis pizza elke week is, kom praat na die tyd met my. Miskien kan ons ’n manier uitwerk om dit te laat gebeur. Bietjie fondsinsameling doen.’

Die tiener knik, en Marcus sien iets in sy oë wat nie daar was toe hy sy vraag so blatant gevra het nie.

Respek.

Marcus kyk weer in die vertrek rond. 'Dit geld vir almal van julle. Ons moet na beter dinge in die lewe verlang. Beter as om aan 'n bende te behoort en weg te loop van die skool af. Die polisie sê die helfte van die kinders wat hier woon, haal nie een-en-twintig nie. Dis heeltemal kranksinnig.' Hy voel die passie in sy stem. 'Julle moet groter begin dink as julle 'n ander soort lewe wil hê.'

Hy vertel van sy eie visie, hoe hy wil sien dat kinders na skool na die jeugsentrum toe kom en studiehulp kry. 'Ek sal graag wil sien dat hier ook beraders is. As jy probleme het, moet daar iemand wees met wie jy daaroor kan praat.'

Net voor hy sy toespraak afsluit, sê hy: 'My eie lewe was tot ses maande gelede nog uitsigloos. Ja, ek het vir die Dodgers gespeel. Professionele bofbal, met 'n groot kontrak. Maar dit gee nie 'n mens se lewe sin nie.'

Die kinders luister nou aandagtig.

'Ek het die Here toe uitgedaag. Gesê ek sal in Hom glo as Hy my lewe sinvol maak. Iets vir my gee wat durend is. En raai wat? Hy het dit gedoen. Daarom wil ek julle nou uitdaag.' Sy stemtoon word weer intens. 'Elkeen van julle. 'n Jeugsentrum is nie 'n goeie rede om te lewe nie. God is die enigste Een wat ons lewe sin kan gee. Ek daag jou uit: Praat vanaand met Hom as jou kop die kussing tref. Vra Hom om jou lewe sin te gee.' Marcus haal sy bofbalpet af. 'Bid saam met my.'

En toe bid Marcus Dillinger vir die tweede keer in sy lewe hardop. Hy kan dit skaars glo, en hy begin dit boonop regkry. Hy vra God om die mense wat daar is, te seën, en om die werk van die jeugsentrum te seën. 'Ons het 'n lewensdoel nodig, Here. Gee dit vir ons. Maak ons 'n gemeenskap. Baie dankie vir vanaand. Amen.'

Die skare begin stadig uitmekaar gaan. Verskeie ouers kom hom bedank vir sy betrokkenheid by die jeugsentrum en die gemeenskap. Die tieners bly meestal eenkant. Marcus wonder hoeveel van hulle reeds in 'n bende is.

Die vrywilligers bly agter om op te ruim. Die meeste van die speletjies is by 'n plaaslike gemeente geleen, en die kos wat oorgebly het, moet gebêre word vir kinders wat die sentrum in die komende week sal besoek.

Marcus en Tyler is nog besig om tafels af te vee toe Sami en Mary Catherine daar aankom. 'Ons het al die waterverkoelers skoongemaak.' Sami vee haar hande af. 'Julle ouens is seker gedaan.'

'Gedaan maar gelukkig.' Marcus glimlag na Mary Catherine se kant toe. 'Daardie idee wat jy gehad het ... om te bid voordat die mense kom ... dit was perfek.' Hy kyk na Tyler. 'Ty sê nou net dit was asof hy die Here se hand oor die gebou kon voel. Asof ons Goddelike beskerming gehad het.'

Mary Catherine glimlag, maar sy vermy Marcus se oë. Sy kyk na Tyler en

Sami. 'Gebed maak 'n verskil.'

Marcus dink aan Shamika en klein Jalen, en sy praatjie aan die einde van die aand. Hy rig weer sy woorde aan Mary Catherine. 'Jy het my vanaand daarvan oortuig.'

Dit is asof sy nie weet wat om te sê nie. In plaas daarvan om verder met Marcus te praat, draai sy na Tyler. 'Waar is die Waynes? Ek het nie gesien toe hulle weg is nie.'

'Hulle moes huis toe gaan, na die kinders toe.' Marcus kyk nog na Mary Catherine, en sy vermy steeds sy oë. 'Hulle het ons na hul huis toe genooi, vir koffie.'

'Wat van Shelly?' Sami kyk na Marcus. 'Sy het nie kom groet nie.'

'Sy het ander planne met haar vriende.' Marcus wil alleen met Mary Catherine praat. Waarom maak sy asof sy nie met hom wil praat nie? 'In elk geval, ek dink ons is nou so te sê klaar hier.'

Hy wil haar net vra om saam te gaan koffie drink by die Waynes se huis, toe offisier Kent instap. Hy gaan staan toe hy die groep sien. 'Marcus, het jy 'n oomblik?'

'Ons kan hier gesels. My vriende weet van die bendes.'

'Goed.' Hy kom nader. 'Daar het vanaand iets gebeur wat ek nie regtig kan verklaar nie. Ons het gehoor dat daar 'n groot geveg gaan wees. Volgens ons informante het almal daarvan gepraat. Daar was veronderstel om ook 'n paar moorde te wees.'

'Dis wat ek vir hulle gesê het.' Marcus kyk weer na Mary Catherine. 'Maar toe het my vriendin MC voorgestel dat ons bid.' Hy kyk na die polisieman. 'Ek reken God het ons gebede verhoor.'

Offisier Kent trek sy hand deur sy hare. 'Beslis.' Hy bly stil. 'Daar was blykbaar 'n polisieman uit 'n ander distrik in die stegie waar die EastTown Boyz bymekaar gekom het. Net een man. Alleen. Sonder enige bystand. Niemand weet wie hy was nie.' Hy huiwer weer. 'In elk geval, wat ook al gebeur het, die ouens het daar uitgehardloop gekom asof 'n trop Dobermanns agter hulle aan is.'

Marcus grinnik. 'Ek hou van daardie prentjie.'

'Hy was seker 'n engel.' Mary Catherine lyk ernstig, haar blou oë helderder as voorheen. 'Hulle is werklik, weet julle.'

Offisier Kent haal sy skouers op. 'Na vanaand sal ek enigiets glo.' Hy knik vir die groep. 'Wees versigtig as julle uitgaan. Ons sal daar bly tot julle weg is.' Hy kyk rond. 'Ek dink vanaand was 'n reusesukses. Hou so aan!'

Toe alles opgeruim is, vra Marcus die ander om by die Waynes se huis bymekaar te kom. Dit is na tienuur, maar hy wil nog 'n bietjie kuier en stories oor die aand uitruil.

‘Kom jy saam?’ Marcus sorg dat hy langs Mary Catherine is toe hulle na die motors toe stap.

‘Ek dink so. Ek hou baie van Rhonda.’

‘Sy is ons almal se ma.’ Marcus glimlag en waai vir haar toe hulle by die motors kom. ‘Sien jou daar!’

Tyler en Marcus ry saam. Op die snelweg op pad Silver Lake toe kyk Marcus na sy vriend. ‘Wat dink jy van Mary Catherine?’

‘Sami se vriendin?’ Tyler draai effens skuins sodat hy Marcus beter kan sien.

‘Ek dag jy en Shelly is saam.’

‘Ja. Ek bedoel, ons is ... soort van.’ Hy trek sy oë op skrefies, al sy aandag op die pad. ‘Mary Catherine ... sy is anders. Jy weet wat ek bedoel.’

‘Wel, ja, sy is uniek, dis seker.’

‘Presies. Ek het dit vanaand agtergekom.’ Hy kyk vinnig na Tyler. ‘Wat dink jy van haar?’

‘Mary Catherine?’ Tyler glimlag. ‘Sy is ’n ander een, vol pret en vol lewe.’

‘Sy het pragtige hare.’ Marcus hoor die afwesigheid in sy eie stem.

Tyler lig ’n wenkbrou. ‘Nie dat jy belang stel nie.’

‘Ek hou van haar gees.’ Marcus sien haar nog waar sy omring word deur die kleintjies. ‘Daardie meisiekind is lief vir die Here as enige iemand of enige iets anders.’

‘Dit is so.’ Tyler glimlag. ‘Sami sê Mary Catherine is so eg soos ’n stukkie goud.’

‘Ja.’ Marcus se gesig word ernstig. ‘Miskien is dit die ding.’

Die gesprek swaai na hul oefenprogram en die feit dat die gooiers, vangers en gooi-afrigters vroeër as die ander moet rapporteer. Marcus praat nie weer oor Mary Catherine nie en is bly dat Tyler die gesprek oorneem. Hy sukkel om sy aandag by die gesprek te bepaal. Sy gedagtes maal om net een ding; hy kry dit nie uit sy gedagtes nie.

Die lig in Mary Catherine se oë.

En die feit dat hy haar oor ’n paar minute weer gaan sien.

~

Jag en Aspyn sit agter in die Hummer terwyl Marcus terugry Silver Lake toe. Hulle is moeg, maar nie van plan om Marcus vir ’n oomblik alleen te laat nie. Daar is te veel op die spel.

Jag voel hoe hy vervul en vernuwe word met die krag van God. ‘Ons was vanaand suksesvol.’

‘Ja.’ Sy kyk egter bekommerd na hom. ‘Jy was kwaad, Jag. Ek kon dit aanvoel toe ons mekaar by die jeugsentrum kry.’

‘Natuurlik was ek kwaad.’ Hy is reeds kalmer. ‘Daardie kinders wou iemand

doodmaak. Daar is genoeg doodslag op aarde – die kinders hoef dit nie ook aan mekaar te doen nie.’

‘Dit was meer as dit.’ Aspyn het ’n bonatuurlike gawe om ander engele te verstaan. Veral vir Jag. Dit maak van haar ’n wonderlike spanmaat, maar sy kan soms inmengerig wees.

Hy kan egter nie die waarheid systap nie. Engele is eerlik. Punt. ‘Een van hulle het ’n wapen op my gerig. Selfde soort as die een wat die sluipskutters gebruik het ...’

‘... om Terrance Williams mee te skiet.’ Aspyn se stem is simpatiek. ‘Ek is so jammer.’

‘Hierdie ... hierdie woede. Dit het my net oorval.’ Jag voel nou weer sy ou self, rustig en doelgerig. ‘Ek het dit daardie ander keer ook gevoel. Net nadat Terrance Williams geskiet is.’ Dis vir hom bykans onmoontlik om dit te beskryf.

‘Ek verstaan.’ Sy raak aan sy skouer. ‘Jy moet net versigtig wees, Jag. Woede sal nie die geregtigheid van God dien nie. Jy weet dit.’

‘Ja.’

‘Vanaand was maar nog net die begin. Dinge gaan woes raak Dinsdagaand.’

‘Ek weet. Ek moet dit onder beheer hê.’ Jag knik. Hy waardeer Aspyn se wysheid.

‘Presies.’

Jag sien weer die bende in die stegie, hoe hulle hom getart het en die wapen voor hom rondgeswaai het. Hy dwing die beelde om uit sy gedagtes te verdwyn. ‘Dankie, Aspyn. Ek sal gereed wees.’

Hy het ’n gevoel dat Aspyn reg is. Die ergste lê nog voor.

9



FROM THE MOMENT SHE walked inside, Mary Catherine loved everything about the Waynes’ house. The smell of fresh coffee came from the kitchen, and something else, something warm and rich with cinnamon.

“Come in!” Rhonda welcomed them inside. “I roasted a batch of organic almonds. A little coconut oil and cinnamon and they’re delicious.”

“Mmmm.” Mary Catherine flashed a grin at Sami and then back to Rhonda

Wayne. "I knew I liked you."

"We don't do sugar. At least most days." She grabbed a potholder and pulled the pan of fresh roasted almonds from the oven. They smelled delicious. "I whipped up a pint of organic cream."

Rhonda went on about how organic cream from grass-fed cows was actually healthy. "Full of omega-three acids. The good ones."

Mary Catherine knew all about that. She could've written a book on the foods that healed as opposed to those that caused inflammation. Low carb, high fat. Moderate protein. "I love that kind of cream."

Sami looked lost. "You two are speaking a different language."

"Here." Rhonda put a spoonful of the almonds in a bowl and topped it off with a dollop of whipped cream. She handed it to Sami. "Try this."

From the first bite it was clear Sami loved the dish. "This is amazing. What's in it?"

Rhonda laughed. "Nothing. Pure cream and organic vanilla. I whip it myself so it's just the right kind of creamy."

"I don't think I could ever go back after this. I don't miss the sweet taste at all."

"Sugar fuels illness."

"Exactly." Mary Catherine pulled up a chair and grinned at Rhonda. "I've been telling Sami that. She eats way too much chocolate."

"I'm an addict. What can I say?"

Mary Catherine took a bowl of the almonds and cream as the guys walked in. Tyler led the way. "How'd you beat us?"

"Better driver." Mary Catherine looked over her shoulder, teasing him. "Nah, you got stuck at the light before the freeway."

"I was gonna say . . ." He laughed and looked back at Marcus. "Also, we took it slow on purpose. Us guys need our bonding time."

"Oh, I'm sure." Sami went to Tyler and the two of them shared a quick kiss. "You have to try Rhonda's almonds and cream."

Ollie had been checking on the kids. He joined them now and smiled at Mary Catherine. "So you're a health nut like my wife?"

"You could say that." She shared a look with her new friend. "We're trying to convert Sami."

The conversation continued, and Mary Catherine held onto every moment. This was what family love should feel like. Fifteen minutes later, Sam came down for water. Rhonda was kind and tender with him, kissing him on the cheek before he returned to bed.

And when Shane came home from a movie with friends, Rhonda and Ollie took time talking to him, hearing details about his night. Only their daughter,

Sierra, wasn't home. She had spent the night with a friend. But Mary Catherine had seen enough to know that if God by some miracle blessed her with more time, with a man like the one she used to talk about finding, then this was the sort of family she wanted to have.

A family who lived out their faith as easily as they breathed.

They talked for a good hour before Sami and Tyler decided to head out. "We'll be here tomorrow for church!"

Mary Catherine had planned on leaving now, too, but as she found her purse Marcus approached her. "Hey . . . why don't you stay? I can take you home in a bit." He grinned at Sami and Tyler. "You know, give them their space."

"Marcus!" Sami sounded disappointed, but she was teasing him. "We don't need our space." She motioned to Mary Catherine. "Come on, MC. We want you to come with us."

"No, really." Marcus seemed like he was trying to keep things casual. "Stay and walk around the block with me. I want to hear your story." He patted his stomach. "Plus I have to walk off these almonds."

Mary Catherine could feel it again, the heat in her cheeks, the way her heart beat faster around him. Was he serious? Did he really want to take a walk with her? In her peripheral vision she thought she saw Tyler give Sami a light elbow. Whatever the signal meant, Sami was suddenly quick to change her mind.

"Actually, it might be nice to have a little time with Tyler." She leaned up and kissed him again. "We have a lot to talk about."

Like that they were gone, and before Mary Catherine could argue, Marcus was ushering her outside for the walk. Never mind that it was nearly midnight or that Mary Catherine had intended to avoid anything even remotely like this. Marcus couldn't help himself. Every time they shared a moment together, the world around him turned to summer. The hillsides and skies of his heart came alive with new life.

They were still in sight of the Waynes' house when Marcus laughed. "Sorry if that felt a little forced."

"Just a little." Mary Catherine had no idea why he wanted this time with her. Whatever his reason, she had to be careful. She couldn't stop herself from feeling attracted to him. But she could at least keep her distance emotionally.

"I don't know . . . it's like I sensed something earlier, when we were cleaning up. Like you didn't want to look at me." Marcus slowed his pace so he could see her. "Or was that just my imagination?"

Mary Catherine was glad for the cover of night. She uttered a single laugh. "Well, Marcus. I mean, you have Shelly. I wouldn't want to be too friendly."

He nodded slowly. "Okay. If that's all it was."

"Tell me about her. You and Shelly." Mary Catherine was proud of herself. This was a good way to turn the conversation.

"There's not much to say." He stayed quiet for a few minutes while they walked. Then he turned to her. "So what's your story, Mary Catherine? Tyler tells me you grew up in Nashville. Why'd you leave?"

"Good question." There had been times when she tried to tell herself Marcus was shallow. He was a pro ballplayer, after all. But that simply wasn't the case. His tone was kind and tender, and she sensed a depth in him that surprised her.

"Didn't you like the South?" Their pace was easy, relaxing.

"Actually, I loved it." She laughed lightly and looked up at the stars. "I guess I was too comfortable. Everything felt predictable and safe."

"Hmm." Marcus laughed, but barely hard enough to be heard. "Sounds like you. Sami says you like jumping out of planes and riding your bike down Santa Monica Boulevard."

"And swim with dolphins." She laughed. "That actually happened right here."

"Really?"

"Yes. It was amazing." She cast him a look. "I like feeling alive." She walked a few more steps and shrugged. "That's just me."

"Now we're getting somewhere." They turned a corner and kept walking. "Were you like the oldest of six kids or what? Locked in the house till you were eighteen?" He chuckled. "Why live life on the edge?"

"Actually, I was an only child. My parents did well for themselves. The right house in the right neighborhood, the best social clubs and affiliations." She smiled. "They loved me, but . . . they didn't stay together." This was the part of her story where her health came into play. Both of her parents worried about her, wanted her close to them, where she could be safe.

Mary Catherine wanted adventure.

She skipped that part. Marcus didn't need to know. There would be no reason.

"Okay. Why Los Angeles?" He seemed genuinely interested.

She grinned. "It was everything Nashville was not. Wild and loud and crowded and godless." She nodded once. "In LA, I don't go an hour without knowing how desperately I need the Lord. I like it that way."

"So did you break some poor guy's heart back in Nashville?"

"Hardly." She laughed out loud. "I dated a few guys, but I never found *that* guy. You know . . . the one I could be real with." She thought for a moment. The last guy she dated was a good one. They loved to laugh together. But in

the end, he wasn't the right one. Just as well, given the news about her heart. "I guess I'm picky."

"I could use a little more of that." He grinned at her.

He had to be talking about Shelly, but Mary Catherine didn't want to push the issue. She slowed her steps. "Another thing . . . have you noticed how selfish everyone is? We're all about our own social media, our own platform, our own interests. I still haven't found a guy who can be in the moment. You know, carry on a conversation without checking his phone halfway through."

Marcus stopped walking and looked down. He checked the ground in front of him and behind him, and then reached into the pockets of his jeans. When he found them empty, he patted his other pockets. Then he shrugged.

"You lost your phone?" Mary Catherine glanced at the sidewalk behind them.

"No." He slipped his hands in his pockets and looked straight into her eyes. "I didn't bring it. Figured I'd rather be in the moment."

Touché. Mary Catherine felt something strange and unfamiliar in her heart. He was right. Where so many guys were too distracted to pay attention, Marcus had asked for this time with her and he'd remained truly present. "Thank you." She felt her smile soften.

They started walking again. "For what?"

"For being in the moment. That's one of the greatest gifts people can give each other. It's like a lost art. Listening. Caring enough to look into someone's eyes." She couldn't fall for him. Absolutely not. But she would be wrong not to express her gratitude. "Just . . . thanks."

"You're welcome." He looked happy with himself. "Maybe next time we have a conversation among friends you'll look *me* in the eyes. The way you didn't do today."

"I told you . . ." She giggled, not really frustrated.

"I know . . . you didn't want to seem too friendly. I'm dating Shelly. I get it." He gave her a knowing look. "Let's just say today at the center no one would've thought you even knew me."

"Good." She kept a straight face. Much as she wanted to laugh, she needed him to know how serious she was. "I didn't want to overstep my bounds."

"Obviously." The quiet between them for the next few steps felt comfortable. Marcus looked at her a long time before his next question. "So is it a faith thing, your living dangerously? Jumping out of planes and swimming with sharks?"

Her laughter felt wonderful. "Not sharks. Dolphins."

"Whatever." He chuckled. "Really, Mary Catherine. Why?"

The truth wasn't something she was willing to talk about. Her doctor had

told her anything that released too much adrenaline was bound to be hard on her heart. A quiet life, they told her. Keep to the house, the daily tasks and chores. Learning and reading were fine. A desk job, maybe. Anything out of the box would knock days off the life of her heart.

Her mother had begged her to follow her doctor's orders.

Mary Catherine would rather have died young. She took a deep breath and imagined a way to explain all that without talking about her health. "There's a Bible verse in John, chapter ten, verse ten."

He shook his head. "Don't know it."

"Jesus is talking. He says, 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.' " Her tone held a passion never far from the surface. "I figure if Jesus came to give me that sort of life, well, then . . . I might as well live it."

"Hmmm." Marcus nodded. "Fair enough."

"How about you, Marcus Dillinger? You ever jump out of a plane or swim with dolphins?" She loved this, walking with him at midnight. This far up in the hills, the stars shone bright overhead, the moon a sliver in the sky.

His laugh was quiet again. "Hardly." He sighed. "For me it was baseball, baseball, baseball. My dad was a blond, blue-eyed ballplayer for the Giants back in the day. Played a few years and then got cut. He moved to the Bahamas to try to figure out his life and met the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen." He smiled. "That's how he tells the story. My mom was just eighteen, six years younger than my dad. Born and raised in the Bahamas. They fell in love and got married six months later at a little white church in downtown Nassau. Right in the heart of the city."

Mary Catherine had figured one of Marcus's parents must've been white. His light skin and eyes told her that much. But she had never heard his parents' love story. "That's beautiful."

"It was. My dad got a job in San Diego in computer engineering. He and my mom had me and two girls. Dad and I played ball all the time. He was one of my coaches. Believe it or not, I had a choice about playing baseball. He wasn't one of those fathers." Marcus grinned. "I just loved the game."

"So no time for planes and dolphins?" She could feel her eyes sparkling as she looked at him.

"Exactly."

Their teasing made her feel like she'd known him all her life. *He has a girlfriend*, she told herself. *Don't let yourself fall*. "Hey, wait!"

"What?" He looked intently at her. He had definitely perfected the art of being present.

"I know that little white church. The one in Nassau. Is it on the main street, right past the pink government buildings?"

He looked surprised. “Yes. That’s the one.”

“I went there once on a mission trip.” She laughed. “I know. Not the roughest place to do mission work. Anyway, on Sunday most of our group went to service there. It was super colorful. They passed out tambourines and percussion instruments.” She nodded. “I loved it.”

“You and my mom should meet.” His tone remained genuine. “She grew up in that church. She’d love to hear that story.”

They had turned around and now they were nearly back to the Waynes’ house. Mary Catherine wasn’t going to bring up Shelly again, but this time Marcus did. “You asked about Shelly. She’s interesting. A little aggressive.” He raised his brow. “It’s awkward, her being Coach’s niece.”

“Mmm.” Mary Catherine didn’t want to say too much. “You think Coach Ollie is in favor?”

“I’m not sure.” His laugh sounded nervous. “Just feels awkward. I kind of fell into the whole thing before I knew what was happening.”

Up until then, Mary Catherine wondered whether Marcus had a chink in his armor. She had assumed the guy was a typical pro ballplayer, but her assumptions had been wrong.

Until this.

She considered her words before she spoke. “So . . . are you pursuing her?” She was careful not to sound mean. Just curious. “Or the other way around?”

“I asked her out, if that’s what you mean. But more to kind of see if we were compatible.” He was quiet for a long minute. “Actually, I guess she asked Coach if I was interested. I didn’t really know about her until a month ago.”

Mary Catherine didn’t respond. Maybe it was better if Marcus was allowed to sit with his own thoughts for a bit.

“Yeah, maybe she’s doing the pursuing.” He looked troubled. “To answer your question. I guess I hadn’t thought about it.”

They were back at the house. Mary Catherine smiled. “The Waynes are great. I love the way their home feels.” She was finished talking about Shelly. Marcus could figure that out later.

“They’re my second family.” He looked to the front door. “They seriously always have a light on.” He chuckled. “Like that old motel commercial my dad used to like.”

They both laughed and headed inside. Mary Catherine said goodbye and thanked Rhonda and Ollie for having her.

“Come anytime. Seriously.” Rhonda hugged her. “We health foodies need to stick together.”

“I’ll be back.” She grinned from Rhonda to Ollie. “I want to meet your daughter next time.”

The only thrill greater than jumping out of a plane or bungee jumping off a bridge was investing in people. Mary Catherine worked with the youth group every Sunday at church. She didn’t lead it, but even as a volunteer, girls were always talking to her. Telling her their struggles.

It was another wonderful reason she loved being alive.

Marcus walked her out and opened her door first before he slid behind the wheel. The whole way back to the apartment, Mary Catherine couldn’t stop from dreaming. Even just a little. And in the time it took them to reach the freeway, she allowed herself to imagine the greatest possible plans ahead. If she could, she would walk that way whatever the cost. However many steps the journey might hold.

For tonight, she could dream about the possibilities. As if for this one moment she might pretend Marcus was *her* boyfriend and the two of them were facing life together. Head on.

She looked out her side window. *Don’t be ridiculous*, she chided herself. *There are a hundred reasons why it could never happen.*

Because Mary Catherine had no time for a relationship. If God was going to give her more than thirty years—the way she truly believed—then she would spend it living and serving and loving people.

Just not the sort of love her wayward heart had dreamed about tonight.

Hoofstuk 9

~

V

an die oomblik toe sy by die huis instap, hou Mary Catherine van die Waynes se huis. Die geur van vars koffie kom uit die kombuis aangesweef, en van nog iets, warm en ryk, met kaneel daarin.

‘Kom in!’ Rhonda verwelkom hulle by die deur. ‘Ek het organiese amandels gerooster. Dis heerlik saam met klapperolie en kaneel!’

‘Mmmmm.’ Mary Catherine glimlag vir Sami en toe vir Rhonda. ‘Ek het sommer geweet ek gaan baie van jou hou!’

‘Ons gebruik nie suiker nie. Wel, die meeste van die tyd nie.’ Sy haal ’n vatlap van die rak af en haal die pan amandels uit die oond. Dit ruik heerlik. ‘Ek het regte room geklits.’

Sy verduidelik dat koeie wat gras vreet, se room eintlik gesond is. 'Vol omega 3-olie. Die goeie soort.'

Mary Catherine weet alles daarvan af. Sy sou 'n handboek kon skryf oor kos wat genees en kos wat inflammasie veroorsaak. Lae koolhidraat- en hoë vet-inhoud. Matige hoeveelhede proteïene. 'Ek is mal oor regte room.'

Sami lyk 'n bietjie verlore. 'Julle twee praat in tale.'

'Wag.' Rhonda sit 'n lepel amandels in 'n bakkie en skep room daarop. 'Proe.'

Van die eerste hap af kan 'n mens sien Sami hou van wat sy eet. 'Maar dis wonderlik. Wat is die geheime bestanddeel?'

Rhonda lag. 'Daar is nie. Jy eet room en organiese vanielje. Ek klits dit self, net tot dit romerig genoeg is.'

'Ek dink nie ek sal ooit weer 'n ander soort room kan eet nie. Ek mis glad nie die suiker in kunsroom nie.'

'Suiker is brandstof vir siektes.'

'Presies.' Mary Catherine trek 'n stoel nader en glimlag vir Rhonda. 'Ek sê dit die hele tyd vir Sami. Sy eet heeltemal te veel suiker.'

'Ek is verslaaf. Wat kan ek sê?'

Mary Catherine neem 'n bakkie amandels en room net toe die twee mans ingestap kom, Tyler voor aan. 'Hoe het julle dit reggekry om ons te wen?'

'Beter bestuurder.' Mary Catherine kyk terglustig oor haar skouer na hom. 'Nee, darem nie. Julle het by daardie robot voor die snelweg vasgehaak.'

'Ek wou net sê!' Hy lag en kyk om na Marcus. 'Ons het buitendien aspris stadig gery. Ons ouens het tyd nodig vir gemeenskaplike onderskraging.'

Ollie kom terug van die kinders af. Hy glimlag vir Mary Catherine. 'Klink my jy is 'n gesondheidsfanatikus soos my vrou?'

''n Mens kan so sê.' Sy en haar nuwe vriendin kyk vir mekaar. 'Ons probeer nou net om Sami oor te haal.'

Hulle gesels gemaklik verder, en Mary Catherine koester elke oomblik. Dit is hoe gesinsliefde moet wees. 'n Kwartier later kom Sam water haal. Rhonda is vriendelik en sag met hom, en soen hom in die nek toe hy teruggaan kamer toe.

En toe Shane huis toe kom na 'n aand uit saam met sy vriende, maak Rhonda en Ollie tyd om 'n bietjie met hom te gesels en oor sy aand uit te vra. Dit is net hul dogter, Sierra, wat nie tuis is nie. Sy het by 'n vriendin gaan oorslaap. Maar Mary Catherine het reeds genoeg gesien om te weet dat as die Here haar deur 'n wonderwerk meer tyd gee, en as Hy haar seën met die soort man oor wie sy altyd gepraat het, sy so 'n gesin sal wil hê.

'n Gesin wat hul geloof so natuurlik uitleef soos wat hulle asemhaal.

Hulle kuier nog 'n uur lank voordat Tyler en Sami besluit om huis toe te gaan.

‘Ons sien julle môreoggend vir kerk!’

Mary Catherine wil saamry, maar terwyl sy haar handsak soek, staan Marcus nader. ‘Haai, hoekom bly jy nie nog ’n rukkies nie. Ek kan jou huis toe neem.’ Hy glimlag vir Tyler en Sami. ‘Jy weet, ons moet hulle nou en dan ’n bietjie alleentyd gee.’

‘Marcus!’ Sami klink teleurgesteld, maar sy terg net. ‘Ons het nie alleentyd nodig nie.’ Sy beduie na Mary Catherine. ‘Kom MC. Ry gerus saam.’

‘Nee, ernstig.’ Marcus lyk lighartig, vrolik. ‘Bly en gaan stap ’n ent saam met my. Ek wil graag jou storie hoor.’ Hy vryf op sy maag. ‘Buitendien het ek ’n stappie nodig na al daardie amandels.’

Mary Catherine voel dit weer: haar wange wat gloei, en haar hart wat vinniger klop as hy in die omgewing is. Is hy ernstig? Wil hy regtig saam met haar gaan stap? Uit die hoek van haar oog sien sy hoe Tyler vir Sami met sy elmboog stamp. En dit lyk asof Sami verstaan, want sy sê: ‘Eintlik sal dit nogal lekker wees om bietjie alleentyd saam met Tyler te hê.’ Sy leun oor en soen hom. ‘Ons het baie om oor te praat.’

En skielik is hulle weg, nog voordat Mary Catherine ’n woord kan inkry, en stap Marcus saam met haar na buite vir die beloofde stappie. Al is dit byna middernag en al was Mary Catherine vas van plan om enige iets van hierdie aard tot elke prys te vermy.

Hulle is skaars weg van die huis toe Marcus lag. ‘Ekskuus as jy voel jy is in ’n blik gedruk.’

‘Dareem net ’n bietjie.’ Mary Catherine weet glad nie waarom hy met haar wil gesels nie. Sy weet net sy moet versigtig wees. Sy kan dit nie help nie; sy voel aangetrokke tot hom. Maar sy kan ten minste emosioneel op ’n afstand bly.

‘Ek weet nie ... dis iets wat ek vroeër ook aangevoel het, terwyl ons opgeruim het. Asof jy nie na my wil kyk nie.’ Marcus loop stadiger sodat hy na haar kan kyk. ‘Of was dit net my verbeelding?’

Mary Catherine is bly dit is donker. Sy lag effens. ‘Wel, Marcus. Ek bedoel, jy het vir Shelly. Ek wil nie te vriendelik met jou raak nie.’

Hy knik stadig. ‘Oukei. As dit al is.’

‘Vertel my van haar. Van jou en Shelly.’ Mary Catherine voel trots op haarself. Dit is ’n goeie manier om die gesprek te swaai.

‘Daar is nie veel om te sê nie.’ Daar is ’n paar minute stilte terwyl hulle aanstap. Toe draai hy weer na haar. ‘Wat is jou storie, Mary Catherine? Tyler sê jy het in Nashville grootgeword. Waarom is jy daar weg?’

‘Goeie vraag.’ Sy het haarself al probeer wysmaak dat Marcus vlak is. Hy is immers ’n professionele bofbalspeler – hy moet wees. Maar dit is eenvoudig nie waar nie. Sy stem is warm en vriendelik, en sy voel ’n verrassende diepte in hom aan.

‘Hou jy nie van die suide nie?’ Hulle stap gemaklik, ontspanne.

‘Nee, ek was baie lief vir die suide.’ Sy lag ligweg en kyk op na die sterre.

‘Ek dink ek was te gemaklik daar. Alles was voorspelbaar en veilig.’

‘Hmm.’ Marcus lag, maar so sag dat sy hom skaars kan hoor. ‘Klink soos jy. Sami sê jy vryval en jy ry fiets in die hoofstraat.’

‘Ek hou daarvan om te voel ek lewe ten volle.’ Sy kyk na hom. ‘Maar dis net ek.’

‘Nou vorder ons.’ Hulle gaan om ’n hoek. ‘Was jy die oudste van ses kinders of wat? Toegesluit in die huis tot jy agtien was?’ Hy lag weer. ‘Waarom leef jy graag gevaarlik?’

‘Nee, ek was ’n enigste kind. My ouers is welgesteld. Die regte huis in die regte buurt, die beste sosiale klubs en organisasies.’ Sy glimlag. ‘Hulle was lief vir my, maar ... hulle is later uitmekaar.’ Sy is nou by die deel van haar verhaal waar sy iets oor haar gesondheid behoort te sê. Al twee haar ouers is bekommerd oor haar, en wil hê sy moet naby hulle wees, waar sy veilig kan wees.

Mary Catherine wil avonture beleef.

Sy spring liewer oor daardie deel. Marcus hoef nie te weet nie. Hoekom moet hy?

‘Oukei, maar hoekom Los Angeles?’ Marcus klink regtig geïnteresseerd.

Sy glimlag. ‘Dit is alles wat Nashville nie is nie. Wild en luidrugtig en oorvol en goddeloos.’ Sy knik stadig. ‘In LA is daar nie ’n uur waarin ek nie weet hoe nodig ek die Here het nie. Ek hou daarvan.’

‘En het jy ’n arme man met ’n gebroke hart in Nashville agtergelaat?’

‘Nee wat.’ Sy lag hardop. ‘Ek het ’n bietjie uitgegaan, maar nooit *daardie* ene gevind nie. Jy weet ... die een by wie ek myself kan wees.’ Sy dink ’n oomblik na. Die laaste man met wie sy uitgegaan het, was gaaf. Hulle kon saam lag. Maar hy was nie die regte een nie. Ook maar goed, gegewe die nuus wat sy oor haar hart gekry het. ‘Ek is seker maar te uitsoekerig.’

‘Ek kan so ’n eienskap nuttig gebruik.’ Hy glimlag vir haar.

Hy praat seker oor Shelly, maar Mary Catherine wil liewer nie uitvra nie. Sy stap stadiger. ‘Nog iets ... het jy agtergekom hoe selfsugtig almal is? Ons is die hele tyd besig met ons sosiale media, ons eie platform, ons eie dinge. Ek soek ’n ou wat in die oomblik teenwoordig kan wees. Jy weet, kan gesels sonder om elke nou en dan eers te kyk wat op sy selfoon aangaan.’

Marcus gaan staan. Hy kyk op die grond voor hom en agter hom rond, en toe deursoek hy sy jeans se sakke. Toe hy niks kry nie, soek hy deur sy ander sakke. Toe haal hy sy skouers op.

‘Is jou selfoon weg?’ Mary Catherine kyk ook op die grond agter hulle.

‘Nee.’ Hy sit sy hande in sy sakke en kyk haar reguit in die oë. ‘Ek wou dit

nie bring nie. Ek wou liever in die oomblik wees.'

Kolskoot. Mary Catherine voel iets vreemds en onbekends in haar hart se omstreke. Hy is reg. Baie ouens se aandag word die hele tyd afgelei, maar Marcus het gevra dat sy tyd vir hom gee, en hy was die hele tyd regtig in die oomblik by haar teenwoordig. 'Dankie.' Sy voel hoe haar glimlag versag.

Hulle begin weer aanstap. 'Vir wat?'

'Dat jy in die oomblik is. Dit is een van die gawes wat mense mekaar kan gee. Dit is 'n verlore kuns. Om te luister. Om genoeg om te gee om iemand in die oë te kyk.' Sy kan nie op hom verlief raak nie. Beslis nie. Maar dit sal verkeerd wees om nie haar dankbaarheid te betuig nie. 'So ... dankie.'

'Nie te danke nie.' Hy lyk gelukkig en rustig. 'En as ons dalk weer tussen vriende is en met mekaar gesels, sal jy my in die oë kyk. Soos jy nie vandag gedoen het nie.'

'Ek het mos gesê ...' Sy giggel, maar sy voel nie vies nie.

'Ek weet ... jy wou nie té vriendelik lyk nie. Ek en Shelly gaan uit. Ek verstaan.' Toe hy na haar kyk, sien sy hy weet. 'Kom ons sê maar net dat niemand wat vandag by die sentrum was, eers vaagweg sou kon dink jy ken my nie.'

'Reg.' Sy hou haar gesig ernstig. Alhoewel sy wil lag, wil sy ook hê hy moet weet hoe ernstig sy is. 'Ek wil nie grense oortree nie.'

'Dis duidelik.' Die stilte tussen hulle voel gemaklik. Marcus kyk 'n lang tyd na haar voordat hy weer praat. 'Is dit oor jou geloof wat jy so gevaarlik leef? Uit vliegtuie spring en saam met die haaie swem?'

Dis lekker om saam met hom te lag. 'Nie haaie nie. Dolfyne.'

'Wat ook al.' Hy lag saam. 'Nee, regtig, Mary Catherine. Waarom?'

Sy wil nie nou gesels oor die antwoord op sy vraag nie. Haar dokters het gesê dat te veel adrenalien nie goed vir haar hart is nie. Sy moet haar stil gedra, het hulle gesê. Bly by die huis, hou jou besig met jou daaglikse roetine-takies. Om te studeer en te lees is goed. Moontlik kantoorwerk. Alles buite daardie raamwerk kan dae van haar hart se leeftyd wegneem.

Haar ma het haar gesmeek om haar dokter se voorskrifte te volg.

Mary Catherine wil liever jonk sterf. Sy haal diep asem en probeer 'n manier vind om dit te verduidelik sonder om oor haar gesondheid te praat. 'Daar is 'n teksvers, Johannes 10:10.'

Hy skud sy kop. 'Ek ken dit nie.'

'Jesus sê daar: "Ek het gekom sodat hulle die lewe kan hê, en dit in oorvloed."' Die passie wat nooit ver onder die oppervlak is nie, is nou duidelik in haar stem. 'Ek dink as Jesus vir my daardie soort lewe wil gee, dan ... wel, dan kan ek dit net sowel met al twee hande gryp.'

'Hmm.' Marcus knik. 'Ja, dit maak sin.'

‘En wat van jou, Marcus Dillinger? Het jy al by ’n vliegtuig uitgespring of saam met die haaie geswem?’ Dis heerlik om in die middel van die nag so saam met hom te stap. Hier bo teen die heuwel is die sterre helder in die naglug, die maan ’n skerfie in die donker.

Hy lag weer sag. ‘Nie juis nie.’ Hy sug. ‘Vir my was dit nog net altyd bofbal, bofbal, bofbal. My pa was op sy dag ’n blonde blouoogspeler vir die Giants. Hy het ’n paar jaar gespeel, en toe na die Bahamas toe getrek om te probeer uitwerk waarom die lewe gaan. Daar kry hy toe die mooiste vrou op aarde.’ Hy glimlag. ‘Altans, dis hoe hy die storie vertel. My ma was pas agtien, ses jaar jonger as my pa. Gebore en getoë in die Bahamas. Hulle het verlief geraak en is ses maande later getroud in ’n klein kerkie in Nassau.’

Mary Catherine het gedink een van Marcus se ouers is wit. Sy ligte vel en oë het dit laat blyk. Maar sy het nog nie sy ouers se liefdesverhaal gehoor nie. ‘Dis ’n pragtige storie.’

‘Dit is. My pa het in San Diego gaan werk as rekenaartegnikus. Hulle het net vir my en my twee susters. Ek en my pa het die hele tyd bofbal gespeel. Hy was een van my breiers. En glo dit as jy wil, ek het self gekies om bofbal te speel. Hy was nie een van daardie pa’s wat hul seuns dwing nie.’ Marcus glimlag. ‘Ek was nog altyd mal daaroor.’

‘Dus geen tyd vir vliegtuie en haaie nie?’ Sy kan voel hoe haar oë blink toe sy na hom kyk.

‘Jip.’

Hulle gekorswel laat haar voel asof sy hom haar lewe lank al ken. *Hy het ’n meisie, sê sy vir haarself. Moenie gaan staan en verlief raak nie.* ‘Haai, wag ’n bietjie.’

‘Ja?’ Hy kyk aandagtig na haar. Hy is beslis ‘teenwoordig in die oomblik.’

‘Ek ken daardie klein wit kerkie. Die een in Nassau. Dis in die hoofstraat, net anderkant die pienk regeringsgebou.’

Hy lyk verbaas. ‘Jy’s reg. Dis die een.’

‘Ek was daar op ’n sendinguitreik.’ Sy lag. ‘Ek weet. Dis nie die moeilikste plek om te gaan sendingwerk doen nie. In elk geval, ons groep het gewoonlik Sondae die diens in daardie kerk bygewoon. Dit was baie, baie kleurvol. Hulle het tamboeryne en perkussie-instrumente uitgedeel.’ Sy knik. ‘Dit was wonderlik.’

‘Jy moet my ma ontmoet.’ Daar is egtheid in sy stem. ‘Sy het in daardie kerkie grootgeword. Ek is seker sy sal graag jou storie wil hoor.’

Hulle het intussen omgedraai en is nou weer naby die Waynes se huis. Mary Catherine wil nie weer oor Shelly praat nie; dit is Marcus wat dit doen. ‘Jy het my oor Shelly gevra. Sy is ’n interessante mens. Nogal aggressief.’ Hy lig ’n wenkbrou. ‘Dis nogal ongemaklik, met dié dat sy ons afrigter se niggie is.’

‘Mmm.’ Mary Catherine wil nie te veel sê nie. ‘Dink jy Ollie wil dit so hê?’ ‘Ek is nie seker nie.’ Sy laggie klink sowaar ’n bietjie senuweeagtig. ‘Dit voel net ongemaklik. Ek het soort van in die ding geval voordat ek besef het wat aan die gebeur is.’

Mary Catherine het gewonder of Marcus ’n swak plek het in sy mondering. Sy het eers gedink hy is ’n tipiese bofbalspeler, maar toe vind sy uit hy is eintlik presies die teenoorgestelde.

Tot nou toe.

Sy weeg haar woorde versigtig. ‘So ... is dit jy wat die verhouding begin het?’ Sy konsentreer daarop om nie krities te klink nie, net nuuskierig. ‘Of is dit andersom?’

‘Ek het haar uitgevra, as dit is wat jy bedoel. Meer om te sien of ons bymekaar pas.’ Hy bly lank stil. ‘Wel, eintlik ... dit was sy wat Ollie gevra het of ek sou belangstel. Ek het nie eintlik iets van haar geweet tot so ’n maand gelede nie.’

Mary Catherine antwoord nie. Miskien is dit beter as Marcus self ’n bietjie nadink oor sy woorde.

‘So ... ja, dis sy wat die inisiatief neem.’ Hy lyk ongelukkig. ‘Om jou vraag te beantwoord. Ek dink ek het nooit daarvoor nagedink nie.’

Hulle is terug by die huis. Mary Catherine glimlag. ‘Die Waynes is wonderlike mense. Ek hou van die atmosfeer in hulle huis.’ Sy is klaar gepraat oor Shelly. Marcus kan dit later self uitwerk.

‘Hulle is my tweede gesin, dis seker.’ Hy kyk na die voordeur. ‘Hulle lig skyn regtigwaar altyd.’ Hy lag ’n bietjie. ‘Soos die ou hotel-advertensie. My pa het baie daarvan gehou.’

Hulle lag en gaan in. Mary Catherine groet en bedank Rhonda en Ollie vir die kuier by hulle.

‘Jy is enige tyd welkom. Regtig.’ Rhonda gee haar ’n drukkies. ‘Ons gesondheidskosfanatici moet bymekaar staan!’

‘Julle sal my weer sien.’ Sy glimlag vir hulle. ‘Ek wil graag volgende keer jul dogter ontmoet.’

Al wat meer opwindend is as om by ’n vliegtuig uit te spring of ’n reksprong van ’n brug af te doen, is om in mense te belê. Mary Catherine werk elke Sondag met ’n groep jong mense by haar kerk. Sy is nie die leier nie, net ’n vrywilliger, maar die meisies gesels graag met haar, vertel haar gereeld van hul probleme.

Dit is nog ’n wonderlike rede waarom sy lief is vir die lewe.

Hulle loop saam uit en Marcus maak die motordeur vir haar oop voordat hy omstap en agter die stuurwiel inskuif. Op pad terug na die woonstel toe kan sy nie ophou droom nie. Net ’n bietjie. Asof sy vir een aand mag maak asof

Marcus haar ou is en die twee van hulle saam die lewe tegemoetgaan. Voluit. Sy kyk by die kantvenster uit. *Moenie simpel wees nie*, maan sy haarself. *Daar is honderde redes waarom dit nie kan gebeur nie*. Want Mary Catherine het nie tyd vir 'n verhouding nie. As God haar net meer as dertig jaar gaan gee (soos sy vas glo), wil sy dit liever gebruik om te lewe en mense lief te hê en te dien. Net nie op die manier waarvan haar weerbarstige hart vanaand droom nie.

10



MARY CATHERINE HATED SEEING her time with Marcus come to an end. He parked in front of the apartment and walked her to the front door. She hoped he couldn't hear how hard her heart was beating. The rush she felt had nothing to do with her health. Something about being with him stirred feelings she'd avoided most of her life.

He stood closer than she liked. Or maybe she liked it more than she wanted to admit. Either way, he looked deep into her eyes before he spoke. Like he had all the time in the world. "I had fun tonight."

"Me, too." She folded her arms in front of her. "Thanks again . . . for not bringing your phone."

He chuckled lightly. The sound sent chills through Mary Catherine, and she could do nothing to stop them. "You, too. Looks like we're both good at being present."

"Yes, sir."

" 'Yes, sir'?" He angled his head. The look in his eyes took her breath. "You had that Southern thing in your voice just then."

She giggled. "Blame it on the upbringing. You can take the girl out of the South . . ."

He grinned at her, as if he wanted to stretch the moment as badly as she did. "But you can't take the South out of the girl."

"Exactly."

"I love it. And you still have an accent, by the way."

"Maybe." She was enjoying herself more than she wanted to admit.

"Anyway . . . I'll say this, Mary Catherine." He paused, searching her

eyes. "Sami was right about you."

"About how wild I am?" She blinked a few times. Under his gaze, her walls didn't stand a chance.

"No . . . that you're one of a kind." He looked up at the sky and then back into her eyes. "I had to find out for myself."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"As it was intended." She wondered if he was going to hug her. Instead, he did the slightest bow. Like a knight from a long-forgotten era. "It's been a pleasure, m'lady."

"Oh, now look." She laughed softly. "Southern gentleman, are you?" The sound faded and she looked deeper into his eyes, all the way to his soul. "Marcus Dillinger . . . you're not who I expected."

"Now, now . . ." A twinkle lit up his eyes and he waved his pointer finger at her. "You thought us ballplayers were all the same."

"I did. I confess." No matter what she'd told herself up to this point, she didn't want the moment to end. She could've stayed out here beneath the stars with Marcus Dillinger, being far too friendly, until daybreak.

"Well"—he took a step back—"happy to prove you wrong." His teasing lifted like morning fog and for several seconds he stood there, just watching her. Again she had the sense he didn't want to leave any more than she wanted him to go. "See you later, Mary Catherine."

"See ya." She put one hand on the door, but she didn't turn around until he did, until he jogged to his Hummer, climbed inside, and pulled away.

Inside, she was grateful Sami was already asleep. She didn't want to answer questions about the night or her walk with Marcus or what she might be feeling. She stood at the window and peered through the crack in the curtains. Her heart was giddy with love and life and every wonderful thing. Springtime reigned in her soul and sunshine followed her into the apartment despite the dark of night outside.

Had the last few hours really happened? Had Marcus really just driven off at one thirty in the morning after spending the most wonderful time with her? And what was she thinking, allowing herself to feel this way?

Mary Catherine had no answers for herself.

For once she didn't care about her sensibilities, about her determination to keep herself unattached, to never fall in love. She always thought she could find a grander purpose outside of love. Learning to fly, or feeding children in Africa, or sneaking Bibles into North Korea. She had believed her wild side was enough to soak all the life she could out of the time God gave her.

But she would never have this night again and right now she would've given up every adventure ahead for the chance to be loved by Marcus

Dillinger. Something that would never happen. She drew a shaky breath.

Right now she didn't feel wild. She felt scared and unsure and lonely. Just for tonight, she wished for the freedom to fall in love if she wanted to. She wished she wasn't sick and that tonight wasn't only a dream. And something else.

She wished she had a hundred years.



IT WAS A half hour back to his house in Silver Lake, and Marcus was pretty sure he'd need every minute to sort through his feelings. The ones that had made it hard to feel the ground beneath his feet a minute ago.

Mary Catherine had filled his senses for the past two hours like no girl ever had. Yet, he was pretty sure she wasn't available. She didn't have a boyfriend—at least he didn't think she did. But she gave off no real proof of being interested, either.

Marcus gripped the steering wheel and gritted his teeth. What was he thinking? Of course she wasn't interested. Hadn't she said that at the beginning? Sure, she'd opened up to him tonight. But in front of their friends she'd been just short of rude. Too concerned with offending his girlfriend. Which was another problem.

He had never intended to have Shelly be his girlfriend.

The thing with Shelly just sort of happened. She was relentless when they were together, and when they weren't, well, she texted him constantly. Always her texts were forward and laced with innuendo. He came to a stoplight and checked his phone.

Another two texts had come in from Shelly while he was saying goodbye to Mary Catherine. The light was still red, so he glanced at them. The first was short. *Miss you.* The second was longer. *All I can think about are those long legs of yours and . . . well, you know. See you soon.* Each text was punctuated by half a dozen emojis.

Of course he hadn't brought his phone on the walk with Mary Catherine. Her texts came in like clockwork.

He tossed the phone on the passenger seat as the light turned green. How had things gotten this way so fast? The two of them hadn't been alone except for their goodbyes—which was a good thing. Even when he took her home, she was all over him, kissing him and asking him to park further down the street. "Let's take our time," she always told him.

Mary Catherine had asked the most profound question of the night. Who was pursuing whom when it came to Shelly? Marcus sighed, and the sound rattled around in the empty Hummer. He knew so little about being a

Christian. Sure, his dad had been a good man. He'd met Marcus's mom in church, after all. But as far back as Marcus could remember there had only been baseball.

A good life, a nice family, and baseball.

He thought about how easily Mary Catherine had rattled off the Bible verse. What was it? John something. Marcus had never even read the Bible, at least not as far as he could remember. It wasn't something he and Tyler had talked about, either.

Mary Catherine's face came to his mind, consuming his senses. She was the sort of girl a guy could pursue. No question. But if they'd had another hour, if their walk had gone on longer, eventually the questions would've turned to him and his past.

He had basically told her everything there was to know—at least from his high school days. He had played ball. Period.

But his time in college and the pros? Those years, there was much more to his story. A sick feeling came over him. There didn't seem to be enough air in the SUV, so he rolled down his window. Pitching for the Oregon State Beavers came with certain expectations. Different girls every weekend. Others on the road and still more midweek on campus. It was all part of the game.

Marcus liked to think he was better than some of his teammates. He didn't drink, didn't party. But he couldn't remember the names of all the girls he'd been with.

Shame burned through him, so that even the skin on his hands felt hot. He could never tell Mary Catherine about his past. She wouldn't want another conversation with him. He squinted at the freeway ahead of him. *Dear God, what sort of pathetic, wretched man am I? How many girls do I owe an apology to?*

He rarely thought about this. Especially in the last few years, when he'd cleaned up his act and stayed away from women. But if he was honest with himself, things only grew worse after the draft.

Los Angeles was a place without values or morals. Everyone was out for themselves, on the hunt for money, fame, sex. The thrill of the one-night stand worked both ways in LA. The girls Marcus hooked up with hadn't wanted a commitment any more than he had.

People using people. Until recently, that was Los Angeles for Marcus.

He tried to imagine what Mary Catherine would think about that. If she were telling him the whole story, the girl hadn't had a serious boyfriend. Maybe not ever—though he found that hard to believe. One thing was for sure—Mary Catherine wasn't going to settle. Not in life, and not in love.

The weight of his past pressed in around his shoulders. Sure, he'd made a

deal with God, and God had come through. But where did that leave him? The question that had plagued him after Baldy's death suffocated him again. Here in his Hummer. If he didn't make it home, if a drunk driver drove the wrong way onto the freeway and he never saw it coming, where would he be at night's end?

Heaven or hell?

Yeah, he needed to talk to Ollie Wayne. The family opened their home week after week. They hosted church every Sunday, but Marcus had never talked about his past, about what to do with it.

Let me just say this, Lord . . . I'm sorry. If I could do things over again, I'd avoid every bit of it. The girls . . . they were nothing to me. But . . . it was something to You. I'm sorry.

The breeze through the open window brushed against his face and the pressure on his shoulders eased. He didn't hear any response, the way he had earlier on the way to the youth center. But he felt something. Hope, maybe. Yeah, that was it. Hope.

He would talk to Ollie and Rhonda and he'd start reading the Bible. He'd start with Mary Catherine's verse in John.

Her name brought him back to the moment.

Tonight was a dream. He could've talked to the beautiful redhead all night. She carried with her a childlike joy, the kind that could warm an entire room. Her very presence was intoxicating. But he didn't dare dream about her.

God might forgive him for his ugly, sordid past. But Mary Catherine would never even have the chance because he could never tell her. If he ever did, the magic of tonight would be gone as soon as he said the words. The simple truth was this:

A girl like Mary Catherine deserved better.

Hoofstuk 10

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M

ary Catherine wil nie hê haar tydjie saam met Marcus moet ophou nie. Hy parkeer voor haar woonstel en loop saam met haar tot by die voordeur. Sy hoop maar hy hoor nie haar hart klop nie. En die hartkloppings het niks met haar gesondheid te doen nie! Iets aan hom maak gevoelens in haar wakker wat sy nog vir die grootste deel van haar lewe vermy het.

Hy staan nader aan haar as waarvan sy hou. Of miskien hou sy meer daarvan as wat sy wil erken. Hoe ook al, hy kyk diep in haar oë voordat hy praat. Asof hy al die tyd in die wêreld het. 'Ek het die aand geniet.'

'Ek ook.' Sy vou haar arms voor haar. 'En weer 'n keer dankie ... dat jy nie jou selfoon gebring het nie.'

Hy lag ligweg. Dit stuur rillings deur Mary Catherine se lyf, en sy kan daar niks aan doen nie. 'Jy ook. Dit lyk asof ons al twee goed is met in die oomblik wees.'

'Ja, Meneer.'

'Ja, Meneer?' Hy draai sy kop skeef. 'Die suide se aksent was darem nou baie duidelik in daardie stem.'

Sy giggel. 'Blameer my goeie opvoeding. Jy kan die meisie uit die suide wegneem ...'

Hy glimlag, asof hy net so graag soos sy die oomblik wil uitrek. 'Maar jy kan nie die suide uit die meisie kry nie.'

'Presies.'

'Ek hou daarvan. En jy het nog jou aksent, so tussen hakies.'

'Moontlik.' Sy geniet dit baie meer as wat sy wil erken.

'In elk geval ... ek wil net nog dit sê, Mary Catherine.' Hy bly stil, soek in haar oë. 'Sami was reg oor jou.'

'Oor hoe wild ek is?' Sy knip haar oë 'n paar keer. As hy so na haar kyk, het haar skanse nie 'n kans om te bly staan nie.

'Nee ... dat jy enig in jou soort is.' Hy kyk op na die lug, en toe weer terug na haar. 'Ek moes self uitvind.'

'Ek sal dit as 'n kompliment aanvaar.'

'Soos dit bedoel is.' Sy wonder of hy haar 'n drukkie gaan gee. Maar hy gee net 'n klein buiginkie. Soos 'n ridder uit vergange se dae. 'Dit was 'n plesier, skone dame.'

'Kyk nou net.' Sy lag sag. "'n Ware heer uit die suide, nê?' Haar lag vervaag en sy kyk dieper in sy oë, tot in sy siel. 'Marcus Dillinger ... jy is glad nie soos ek verwag het nie.'

'Toemaar, ek weet ...' Daar is 'n vonkel in sy oë en hy wys met sy vinger na haar. 'Jy het gedink ons bofbalspelers is almal dieselfde.'

'Ja, ek het. Ek erken dit.' Dit maak nie saak wat sy vir haarself gesê het nie. Sy wil nie hê die oomblik moet ophou nie. Sy kan tot dagbreek hier onder die sterre by Marcus Dillinger staan, en heeltemal te vriendelik met hom wees.

'Wel, ek is bly ek kon jou verkeerd bewys.' Hy tree terug. Sy geterg verdwyn soos mis voor die son en vir 'n minuut of twee staan hy net daar na haar en kyk. En sy het weer die aanvoeling dat hy net so min wil weggaan as wat sy wil hê hy moet gaan. 'Sien jou weer, Mary Catherine.'

‘Sien jou.’ Sy sit een hand op die deurknop, maar draai nie om totdat hy omgedraai het, na sy Hummer gedraf het, ingeklim en weggery het nie.

In die woonstel voel sy dankbaar toe sy sien Sami slaap al. Sy wil nie vrae oor haar aand of haar stappie met Marcus of haar gevoelens beantwoord nie. Sy staan by die venster en loer deur ’n skrefie in die gordyn.

Het die laaste paar uur regtig gebeur? Het Marcus regtig nou net, halftwee in die nag, weggery nadat hulle ’n wonderlike paar uur saam deurgebring het? En wat makeer haar, dat sy haarself toelaat om so te voel?

Mary Catherine het nie antwoorde nie.

Sy gee nie om om haar gevoelhede ’n slag opsy te skuif nie – haar vasberadenheid om nie in ’n verhouding betrokke te raak nie, nie verlief te raak nie. Sy het altyd gedink sy sal ’n hoër lewensroeping as enkellopende vrou kan vind – leer om te vlieg, kinders in Afrika versorg, Bybels in Noord-Korea insmokkel. Sy het geglo haar wilde kant is genoeg om al die lewe te haal uit die tyd wat God vir haar gun.

Maar sy sal nooit weer ’n nag soos hierdie beleef nie, en op die oomblik sal sy al haar toekomstige avonture opoffer om deur Marcus Dillinger bemin te word. Wat nie gaan gebeur nie. Sy haal diep en sidderend asem.

Op die oomblik voel sy nie wild nie. Sy voel bang en onseker en eensaam. Sy wens sy het net vir vanaand die vryheid gehad om verlief te kon raak. Sy wens sy was nie siek nie, en dat vanaand nie ’n droom was nie.

En sy wens sy kon ’n honderd jaar lank leef.

~

Marcus is ’n halfuur se ry van sy huis af, en hy is seker hy gaan elke minuut daarvan nodig hê om sy gevoelens uit te sorteer. Gevoelens wat hom ’n minuut of wat gelede laat glo het hy loop op lug.

Mary Catherine het die afgelope twee uur sy sintuie bedwelm soos geen ander meisie nog kon regkry nie. En tog is hy so te sê seker sy is nie beskikbaar nie. Sy is nie in ’n verhouding nie, altans hy dink nie so nie. Maar sy het ook nie regtig gewys sy is geïnteresseerd nie.

Marcus klem die stuurwiel vas en byt op sy tande. Waaraan dink hy? Natuurlik is sy nie geïnteresseerd nie. Het sy nie reg aan die begin so gesê nie? Ja, sy was vanaand openhartig met hom. Maar toe hul vriende by was, was sy so na aan ongeskik as kan kom. Te bang sy gee aanstoot aan sy meisie. Wat ook ’n probleem is.

Hy het nooit gedink Shelly sal sy meisie word nie.

Die ding met Shelly het basies net gebeur. Sy was meedoënloos as sy by hom was, en as sy nie daar was nie, het sy aanhoudend SMS’e gestuur. Boodskappe met bedekte betekenisse en skimpe. Hy hou by ’n verkeerslig stil

en kyk op sy selfoon.

Twee boodskappe van Shelly terwyl hy voor Mary Catherine se deur staan en gesels het. Die lig is nog rooi, en hy kyk vinnig daarna. Die eerste een is kort: *Mis jou*. Die tweede een is langer: *Al waaraan ek kan dink is jou lang bene en ... wel, jy weet. Sien jou*. In elke boodskap is 'n lang ry emotikons.

Natuurlik het hy nie sy selfoon saamgeneem toe hy en Mary Catherine gaan stap het nie. Daar is die hele tyd boodskappe van Shelly af.

Hy gooi die selfoon op die passasierssitplek toe die lig groen word. Hoe het dinge so vinnig gebeur? Hulle was nooit alleen nie, behalwe wanneer hy haar gegroet het – en dit was 'n goeie ding. Selfs wanneer hy haar huis toe neem, is sy die hele tyd oor hom, soen hom, en vra hom om 'n entjie verder af in die straat te parkeer. 'Kom ons sit eers 'n rukkie hier,' sê sy altyd.

Mary Catherine het die skerpste vraag van die aand gevra. Wie neem die inisiatief: hy of Shelly? Marcus sug, en die geluid roggel deur die leë Hummer. Hy weet so min van Christenwees af. Sy pa was 'n goeie man, verseker. Hy het immers sy ma in 'n kerk ontmoet. Maar so ver as wat Marcus kan onthou, was bofbal al wat saak gemaak het.

Hulle het 'n goeie lewe gehad, was 'n lekker gesin, en het bofbal gespeel.

Hy dink aan die gemak waarmee Mary Catherine 'n teksvers kon aanhaal. Wat was dit nou weer? Johannes iets. Marcus het nog nooit Bybel gelees nie, ten minste nie vandat hy kan onthou nie. Dit is ook nie iets waaroor hy en Tyler praat nie.

Mary Catherine se gesig kom weer voor hom op, en vul sy gedagtes. Sy is die soort meisie wat 'n ou die hof kan maak. Beslis. Maar as hulle nog langer gestaan en gesels het, as hulle stap langer aangehou het, sou die vrae uiteindelik by hom en sy verlede uitgekóm het.

Hy het haar ongeveer alles vertel wat daar te vertel was, ten minste uit sy hoërskooldae. Hy het bofbal gespeel. Punt.

Maar toe hy op universiteit was en later professioneel begin speel het? Daar is baie om by te voeg uit daardie tyd. Hy voel effens naar as hy daaraan dink. Dis asof daar nie genoeg lug in sy voertuig is nie, en hy maak die venster oop. As jy vir die Oregon State Beavers bofbal speel, is daar sekere verwagtings. Elke naweek 'n ander meisie. Nog meer meisies as julle toer, en meisies op kampus. Dis alles deel van die spel.

Marcus dink graag dat hy beter is as party van sy spanmaats. Hy drink nie, en hy hou nie deurnag partytjie nie. Maar hy kan nie eens die name van die meisies onthou met wie hy deurmekaar was nie.

Hy voel so skaam dat sy hande warm word. Hy kan nooit vir Mary Catherine van sy verlede vertel nie. Sy sal nie een verdere gesprek met hom wil voer nie. Hy kyk na die snelweg voor hom. *Liewe Here, wat 'n pateet is ek nie?*

Hoeveel meisies skuld ek 'n verskoning?

Hy het selde hieraan gedink. Veral in die afgelope paar jaar toe hy sy lewe skoongemaak en die los meisies afgesweer het. Maar as hy eerlik moet wees, het dinge net erger geword sedert hy vir die professionele span gekies is.

Los Angeles is 'n plek sonder morele waardes. Almal is daar vir hulself, op jag na geld, roem, seks. Die opwinding van 'n eennagpassie het twee kante in LA. Die meisies het net so min kans gesien vir langtermynverhoudings as Marcus.

Mense wat mense gebruik. Dit was wat LA tot onlangs vir Marcus was.

Hy probeer dink wat Mary Catherine se opinie daaromtrent sou wees. As sy die waarheid praat, het sy nog nooit 'n ernstige verhouding gehad nie. Miskien nog nooit 'n verhouding nie, al vind hy dit moeilik om te glo. Een ding is seker: Mary Catherine is nie van plan om konvensionele keuses te maak nie. Nie wat haar lewe of haar verhoudings betref nie.

Die gewig van sy verlede rus swaar op sy skouers. Hy het 'n ooreenkoms met die Here aangegaan, en die Here was getrou. Maar wat nou? Die vraag wat hom ná Baldy se dood gepla het, kom versmoor hom weer. Hier in sy Hummer. Wat sal van hom word as hy vanaand nooit by sy huis kom nie, as 'n dronk bestuurder skielik in hom vasry sonder dat hy iets daaraan kan doen? Gaan hy hemel toe of hel toe?

Hy moet met Ollie Wayne gaan praat. Die gesin het hul huis vir hom oopgemaak. Hy het elke Sondag hul kerkdiens bygewoon, maar nooit oor sy verlede met Ollie gepraat nie, oor wat hy daaromtrent moet doen nie.

Ek wil net sê, Here, dat ek jammer is daaroor. As ek dit kon oordoen, sou ek alles anders doen. Die meisies ... vir my was dit niks. Maar ... ek weet U neem dit nie ligtelik op nie. Ek is jammer.

'n Luggie kom deur die oop venster ingewaaï, teen sy gesig. Die swaar gevoel op sy skouers voel ligter. Hy hoor nie 'n antwoord soos toe hy op pad jeugsentrum toe gebid het nie. Maar hy voel tog iets. Hoop, miskien. Ja, dit is wat hy voel: hoop.

Hy sal met Ollie en Rhonda gesels en begin Bybel lees. Hy sal met Mary Catherine se teksvers in Johannes begin.

Haar naam bring hom terug na die oomblik.

Vanaand was soos 'n droom. Hy sou die hele aand met die pragtige rooikop kon gesels. Maar hy waag dit nie om daarvan te droom nie. God sal hom miskien sy lelike, vuil verlede vergewe. Maar Mary Catherine sal nooit die kans hê nie, want hy sal haar nooit daarvan kan vertel nie. As hy dit doen, sal die wonder van vanaand eenvoudig verdwyn. Hy besef nou die eenvoudige waarheid.

'n Meisie soos Mary Catherine verdien iemand beter as hy.



LEXY FELT A HUNDRED years old as she walked into her grandma's house. It was only nine thirty, but already the woman was asleep. Her grandma didn't belong in this generation or this neighborhood. She was a God-fearing woman who had nowhere else to turn.

Lexy crossed her arms and stared out the window. A kid had died tonight. One of EastTown's youngest. Dwayne had no choice—that's what he said. The rules had changed. Now if he wanted to be leader of the WestKnights he needed two murders. A kid from EastTown and Marcus Dillinger.

He was halfway there.

Vomit rose in Lexy's throat. Sure, she'd been around a lot of killing. Still, tonight was different. Dwayne hadn't been able to find one of the EastTown Boyz. They were headed home and he was cussing at her. Like it was her fault.

Dwayne didn't have to treat her like that. Lexy was his, heart and soul. He could at least be a little nice. That's what she was telling him when all of a sudden he slowed the car down.

"There." Dwayne had cussed under his breath. "Two-bit punks. Say goodbye to life." He had rolled down his window.

Lexy had heard him cock the gun, but she didn't want to look. For all her time on the streets she'd never actually seen someone shot and killed. Not close like this. But at the last second she looked. She turned and everything happened in slow motion.

The two EastTown Boyz had been sitting on trashcans, their backs to the street, red bandanas proudly wrapped around their heads. And Dwayne had started cussing again, saying something about getting the younger one. Then before Lexy could take another breath, Dwayne fired at the smaller of the two guys.

And both boys had turned and looked right at them and Lexy had gasped. Because they were young. Too young. Twelve, maybe thirteen. Both of them. And she watched the kid's eyes grow wide, watched the fear as Dwayne's bullet ripped through his head.

And the blur continued as the other kid screamed and the one who'd been hit fell to the ground, and the screaming . . . the screaming echoed in Lexy's heart and mind and soul and Dwayne had sped away and that was it.

Her boyfriend had met the challenge.

But Lexy hadn't been able to speak or breathe. All she could see were the boy's eyes as he fell to the ground. And terror shook her body, her knees, her hands. And Dwayne had said, "Don't get soft on me now, baby."

She had turned and looked at him. Dwayne still had the gun in his hand. She said nothing, but she had one thought. The thought she still had now sitting here in her grandma's house.

Maybe she didn't want to be Dwayne's girl.

Anyway, the police would be looking for them by now. The other kid would say it was one of the WestKnights. The chase would be on. It was only a matter of time. Dwayne must've figured that out because right after the shooting he drove her back here. "Don't need no other witness hanging around." He nodded for her to get out. "If you hear a tap on your window later tonight, be ready. I still need to celebrate."

Lexy's breath was still shaky. She turned away from the window and sat in her grandmother's rocking chair. The darkness felt heavy around her. She could already feel the prison bars. There was no way out of this life, not if she wanted one. And where would she go if she did want out? She might as well run in front of a moving train.

The gang would destroy her—one way or another. Behind bars or on the streets.

Being part of the WestKnights was all she knew.

And Dwayne was about to be leader of the gang. The rocking chair creaked in the dead of night. Something moved a few feet from her. Lexy turned but nothing was there. Her heart beat harder. One time she and her friends had watched a movie about demons. Lexy walked away believing they were real. You could feel them even if you couldn't see them. A skin-crawling feeling of horror and evil.

Which was what she was feeling now.

Lexy folded her arms tight around her chest. She could text Dwayne and tell him how scared she was. She was his. She tried to remember that. But all she could see were the kid's eyes as his body fell off the trashcan. As he took his last breath.

She needed a light on. Even if it woke up her grandma.

Another sound over her other shoulder. Lexy put her hands to her face. She didn't want to stand, didn't want to move. But she needed light. Needed it in the most desperate way. Finally she stood and braced for an attack of some

kind. From whatever was here with her, whatever was hunting her.

Somehow she made it to the light switch and flipped it on. There. Her breathing resumed, fast and shallow. There was nothing there, no one with her in the room. The sounds must've been her imagination. Demons weren't real. She was just freaked out by the shooting.

Lexy waited until her breathing relaxed a little. The house was small, two rooms and a kitchen. Nothing more. But it was always clean. Her grandma saw to that. The heaviness in the air remained—even with the lights on. Lexy walked to the kitchen and there on the broken table against the wall sat her grandma's Bible. It was open, like maybe her grandmother had been reading it before she went to bed. Lexy came closer and looked. A section was highlighted, but Lexy couldn't read half the words. Her grandma had tried to teach her, but Lexy had long ago stopped learning. School meant nothing to her.

She sat down, weary and sick from the killing. The Bible was ancient looking, the letters so small her grandmother used a magnifying glass to read it. The letters at the top spelled R-O-M-A-N-S. Lexy had no idea what that meant. She pulled the Bible closer and looked at the yellow part. She could read a few of the words.

Hate what is evil . . . cling to what is good.

A strange feeling came over Lexy, like someone was watching her from the shadows. Hate what is evil? Did the Bible really say that? She looked at it again and read it more slowly this time. Yes, that's exactly what it said. Cling to what is good. Lexy wasn't sure what *cling* meant. Dwayne always told her not to be clingy in front of the guys. Not too much hand-holding and hanging onto him.

She let the idea sink in. So then . . . according to the Bible people were supposed to hate bad things and hold on to good. Lexy dropped slowly to the hard wooden chair and stared at the wall, at nothing, really.

Demons or not, her whole life was built around evil. She didn't think about it that way most of the time, but tonight? Watching the kid from the EastTown gang die right in front of her? That was evil. No one could say different.

But what about the good? Lexy felt ice in her veins. Anger came around her and made the muscles in her face tight. Who was she kidding? There was no good, none at all. Her grandma was good, but no one else. Lexy stared at the Bible and then, in a rush of frustration, she slammed the cover shut. What good could come from an old book, anyway? People had to believe it; they had to read it for it to make a difference.

She stood and thought about going to bed, but she couldn't. She couldn't stop looking at the Bible and thinking about the words her grandma had

colored in yellow. Hate evil. Cling to good.

And suddenly she remembered.

There was someone good out on the streets, someone trying to make things better. Someone who cared about the broken kids and homes without mamas and dads. There was someone willing to put his own money into giving all of them a better way.

His name was Marcus Dillinger.

And tomorrow night at this time Dwayne would be leader of the WestKnights and Marcus would just be another victim. Another guy in a body bag. Tears stung her eyes. She could stop it. Never mind the evil around her, Lexy could cling to good—even if only for tonight.

She dug around in her purse and found a small bag of change. Quarters mostly. Money she'd stolen from her grandma's nightstand. Then she clutched her bag to her side and headed back out the front door. Two blocks down there was a bar with a pay phone outside. From what she'd heard, a caller couldn't be traced on pay phones. If Dwayne found out about this, he'd kill her. Lexy had no doubt.

Four different cars drifted slowly past her as she walked. The drivers looked ready to kill someone, ready to fight. The guys in each of the cars called out to her as they went by. Rude things. Words that reminded her how many times she'd been forced to do stuff she didn't want to do.

Tears trickled down Lexy's cheeks. She wasn't upset, not really. She was just mad at Dwayne. He should've said he'd kill off more of the EastTown Boyz. Not Marcus Dillinger.

Lexy wiped at her tears, her pace hard and fast. The pay phone was just ahead. She reached it and looked over one shoulder, then the other. No one watching, no WestKnights to rat on her. She picked up the phone and dialed 911.

A woman's voice answered. "Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

What was her emergency? Lexy's entire body shook, her mouth so dry she wasn't sure she could talk. She could feel the evil, feel it gaining ground. *Cling to what is good . . . cling to what is good.* She swallowed a few times. "It's . . . it's not an emergency today."

"Ma'am, I need you to be specific." The woman sounded frustrated, like she couldn't be bothered. "What's the emergency?"

"It's . . . Marcus Dillinger." Her heart was pounding so loud she could barely hear herself. Two guys left the bar a few feet from where she was standing.

She hesitated. "Marcus Dillinger, the baseball player?"

"Yes." Lexy looked over her shoulder. What if someone recognized her

and told Dwayne? She clutched the phone. *Be brave, Lexy . . . come on.* She squeezed her eyes shut and found her voice. "Someone from the WestKnights is gonna kill Marcus Dillinger tomorrow night at the new youth center."

"Someone's going to kill Marcus Dillinger?"

"Yes." Fear grabbed at Lexy, hissing at her from all sides. She was crazy to do this. They would kill her for it. "Please help him." She slammed the receiver back down and stared at the phone. She could feel it. That scary feeling again. Demons, maybe. Or people behind her, coming up to her. She spun around and there they were. Three EastTown Boyz, red bandanas, eyes blazing with hate.

Coming for her.

Lexy pressed her back against the cold metal phone. She was going to die here. It was only a matter of minutes.

"You dead, WestKnight girl." The older one narrowed his eyes at her. "But we gonna have some fun with you first."

Before Lexy could scream, before she could tell them she wasn't afraid, that they could do what they wanted because she was not a coward, because for once in her life she was clinging to the good, before she could even think about what to do next, a huge police officer stepped out of the shadows. He had big shoulders and longish blond hair.

"Go home, boys." His voice was loud. So loud it rattled through Lexy's soul.

The EastTown Boyz turned toward him and one of them drew a gun. But the cop kept coming, walking right at them. His eyes looked bright, like something weird from a movie. He never blinked. Just kept walking up to them, slow and serious. "I said . . . go home. You don't want to do this."

"Stop, man. I'll shoot!"

The officer looked more like a mountain as he got closer. "Go ahead." He stepped in front of Lexy. He was so big she couldn't see the guys around him. Then the cop pulled a club from the leg of his uniform. "Don't give me a reason."

"Look, man, you're not from around here." One of the EastTown Boyz laughed. "You're the one needs to go."

"In the name of Jesus." His voice was quieter now, calm and different. Like nothing Lexy had ever heard. The man raised his club. "Leave."

A gun versus a club? Lexy figured the EastTown kid would go ahead and shoot. Instead, she could hear their shoes shuffling. Lexy peeked around the cop and saw the three of them backing up fast, their eyes scared. Then they turned around and started to run, and when they did, the kid with the gun stopped, turned, and shot at the cop.

Fired right at him.

But at the same time the officer didn't flinch, and . . .

Lexy gasped. "What . . . Where's the bullet?" *What happened?* Lexy felt a strange sense of something she'd never felt before. Peace, maybe. Or comfort. Who was this guy? What had he said? Speaking in the name of Jesus? Cops didn't talk like that. She moved out from behind him and looked up at him.

The officer wasn't listening. He was still staring at the EastTown Boyz, watching as the reality hit them. The bullet seemed to have gone right through the officer and then ricocheted off the wall. Just a few feet from her.

They began to run as fast as they could down the street until they were out of sight.

Only then did the officer turn to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "You're okay. You need to get home."

The man's eyes had a hundred colors. Green and blue and even a white kind of light. "Who . . . are you?"

"Officer Jag."

She caught the name on his uniform. J-A-G. "How . . . did you know I needed help?"

"Lexy." The cop was calm. "God sees your heart. He has a plan for you." Officer Jag looked down the street and then at the bar a few feet away. When he looked at Lexy again, his eyes were sad. "God's plan for you . . . is so much bigger than this."

Lexy gulped. She didn't know what to say. "How did you know my name?"

"Come on." He looked fierce as he started walking in the direction of her grandma's house. "Stay with me. You need to get home."

Sure enough, the officer didn't leave her side as they walked the few blocks home. Lexy didn't understand anything that had just happened. "I'm serious. How did you know my name?"

"The bigger question is this." He looked down at her, his eyes kind like they had been at first. "Why are you with Dwayne Davis?"

Lexy felt the toughness rise up in her. "Dwayne's my man."

"No." Officer Jag shook his head. "Dwayne's working for the enemy. You stay with him, he'll destroy you."

In all her life, no one had ever spoken to her that way, like there was a plan for her life or like God knew who she was. They reached her grandma's house and the cop walked her to the door. "Think about what I said, Lexy." He looked right through her. "And stay inside."

"Okay."

"Your grandma's Bible is true. Hate evil. Cling to good. Like making that

call for Marcus Dillinger.” The cop took a few steps back down the stairs. “How you live, it’s your choice.”

Lexy felt chills on her arms and legs. “How did you . . .” She couldn’t finish her sentence. Everything was just too weird. Like maybe she was having a dream. She watched the man turn and walk slowly back down the street. Then in a rush she hurried inside, shut the door, and locked it.

Only then did she realize several things all at once. The officer had no car, not that she had seen. And he had been working alone. Which cops never did in this neighborhood. And the biggest question. How had a bullet gone straight through his gut without hurting him?

A thought came to Lexy and she felt her mouth hang open for a few seconds. What if Officer Jag was an angel? Come to tell her to hate evil and cling to good? Like her grandma’s Bible had told her half an hour ago? She thought about that. An angel named Jag who wore a police uniform and was bulletproof? Not possible. Just like the demons she’d imagined earlier. The whole thing was all in her imagination. Probably because of watching that kid get shot earlier. Like seeing that had made her a little crazy. Yeah, that was it. She was just a little crazy. Maybe she would open her eyes and she’d be in bed.

Lexy blinked a few times and looked around. But she wasn’t in bed.

She sat down at the kitchen table and reached again for her grandma’s Bible. Slowly she ran her thumb over the soft, crinkly page. The Bible was too old to matter today. Lexy felt the reality of her situation more than ever before. She had done her good deed. She had called and told the police about Marcus Dillinger.

Officer Jag had told her doing good was her choice.

But he was wrong. What was she supposed to do? Find a new family? She was a WestKnights girl. There was no way out, even if she wanted it. She brushed her teeth and fell into bed, but she couldn’t sleep.

The man’s face, his eyes, stayed with her. Like an Instagram picture in her mind. What kind of regular person could not be hurt by a bullet? Or guess her name? And how had he known exactly what she had read in her grandma’s Bible? Maybe he was some kind of magician. And she was about to be on some reality show. There had to be an explanation.

Because angels and demons weren’t real and neither was God.

The streets were proof of that.

D

it voel vir Lexy asof sy honderd jaar oud is toe sy by haar ouma se huis instap. Dit is halftien, maar die ou vrou is reeds aan die slaap. Haar ouma hoort nie in hierdie buurt en tussen hierdie mense nie. Sy is 'n gelowige vrou wat nêrens anders het om heen te gaan nie.

Lexy kruis haar arms en kyk by die venster uit. 'n Kind is vanaand dood. Een van die jongste lede van die EastTown Boyz. Dwayne het nie 'n keuse gehad nie – of so sê hy.

Die reëls het verander. As hy die leier van die WestKnights wil wees, moet hy twee mense doodmaak. Een van die EastTown Boyz en Marcus Dillinger.

Hy is halfpad daar.

Lexy voel die naarheid in haar keel opstoot. Natuurlik het sy al gesien hoe mense doodgaan. Maar vanaand was anders. Dwayne kon nie een van die EastTown Boyz kry nie, en hulle het toe maar huis toe gekom. Dit was toe dat hy op haar begin vloek het. Asof dit haar skuld was.

Dwayne hoef haar nie so te behandel nie. Lexy behoort aan hom, hart en siel. Hy kon ten minste 'n bietjie gaaf gewees het. Dit is wat sy besig was om te sê toe hy skielik stadiger begin ry.

'Kyk daar.' Dwayne het saggies gevloek. 'Kyk daai laaitie. Sê koebaai vir die lewe, outjie.' Hy het sy venster oopgemaak.

Lexy het gehoor hoe hy die pistool oorhaal, maar sy wou nie kyk nie. Al is sy al so lank op straat, het sy nog nooit gesien hoe iemand geskiet word nie. Nie van naby soos vanaand nie. Maar op die laaste oomblik het sy tog gekyk. Sy het omgedraai en alles sien gebeur, asof in stadige aksie.

Die twee EastTown Boyz het op twee vullisdromme gesit, hul rûe na die straat, rooi bande trots om die koppe gebind. En Dwayne het weer begin vloek, iets gesê van die jongste een. En toe, voordat Lexy kon asemskip, het hy die kleinste enetjie geskiet.

Al twee het omgedraai en na hulle gekyk. Lexy het na haar asem gesnak: Hulle was so jonk! Te jonk. Twaalf of dertien. Al twee. Sy het gesien hoe die kind se oë rek, die vrees gesien toe Dwayne se koeël sy kop tref.

En toe skree die ander ene en die een wat op die grond val, begin ook skree ... daardie geskreeu het in Lexy se hart en gedagtes en siel weerklink. En Dwayne het weggejaag en toe is alles verby.

Haar kêrel het geslaag.

Maar Lexy kon nie praat of asemhaal nie. Al wat sy kon sien, is die seun se oë toe hy die grond tref. Die angs het haar liggaam, haar knieë, haar hande laat

bewe, en Dwayne het gesê: ‘Moenie so ’n *softie* wees nie, *baby*.’

Sy het omgedraai en na hom gekyk. Dwayne het nog die pistool in sy hand gehad. Sy het niks gesê nie, maar een gedagte het by haar opgekom. Die gedagte wat sy nog steeds dink, hier in haar ouma se huis.

Miskien wil sy nie Dwayne se meisie wees nie.

Die polisie sal hulle in elk geval nou soek. Die ander kind sal sê dit was een van die WestKnights. Hulle sal hulle soek. Dit is net ’n kwessie van tyd. Dwayne het dit seker ook uitgewerk, want hy het haar dadelik huis toe gebring. ‘Ons het nie nog ’n getuie nodig nie,’ het hy gesê en gewys sy moet uitklim. ‘As jy later vannag ’n klop aan jou venster hoor, moet jy reg wees. Ek moet dit vier.’

Lexy haal nog rukkerig asem. Sy draai weg van die venster af en gaan sit in haar ouma se skommelstoel. Die donkerte vou swaar om haar. Dit voel kompleet asof sy al klaar in die tronk is. Daar is nie ’n manier om uit hierdie soort lewe vry te kom nie, al wil sy ook. En waar sal sy heen gaan? Sy kan net sowel vir ’n trein probeer weghardloop.

Sy sal sterf as bendelid, op een of ander manier. Óf in die tronk óf op straat.

Die bendelewe is al wat sy ken.

En Dwayne gaan nou die leier van die bende word. Die skommelstoel kraak in die stil nag. Uit die hoek van haar oog sien sy iets beweeg. Lexy draai om, maar daar is niks. Haar hart begin vinniger klop. Sy en haar vriende het eenkeer ’n flik oor demone gesien. Toe hulle daar uitkom, het Lexy geglo hulle bestaan werklik. Jy kan hulle voel, al kan jy hulle nie sien nie. ’n Gevoel van boosheid en afgryse wat jou koue rillings gee.

Presies wat sy nou voel.

Lexy vou haar arms styf voor haar. Sy kan ’n SMS vir Dwayne stuur en vir hom sê hoe bang sy is. Sy behoort aan hom. Sy probeer om dit te onthou. Maar al wat sy kan sien, is die kind se oë toe sy liggaam van die vullisdrom af val. Toe hy sy laaste asem uitblaas.

Sy moet die lig aanskakel. Selfs al maak dit haar ouma wakker.

Daar’s weer ’n geluid agter haar. Sy sit haar hande voor haar gesig. Sy wil nie opstaan nie, wil nie beweeg nie. Maar sy het lig nodig. Dringend nodig. Uiteindelik staan sy op, gereed vir ’n aanval van die een of ander aard. Van wat ook al hier by haar is, wat haar jag.

Sy kry dit tog reg om tot by die skakelaar te kom en die knoppie te druk. Reg. Sy kan weer asemhaal, vinnig en vlak. En daar is niks en niemand by haar in die kamer nie. Dit was seker haar verbeelding. Demone bestaan tog nie regtig nie. Sy was net bang en gespanne oor die skietery.

Lexy wag tot haar asemhaling weer naastebly normaal is. Die huis is klein, net twee vertrekke en ’n kombuis. Niks meer nie. Maar dit is altyd skoon;

daarvoor sorg haar ouma. Maar die swaar gevoel in die lug is steeds daar, selfs al is die ligte aan. Lexy gaan na die kombuis toe, en daar, op die stukkende tafel teen die muur, lê haar ouma se Bybel. Dit is oop, asof haar ouma dit gelees het net voordat sy gaan slaap het. Lexy gaan nader en kyk daarin. 'n Gedeelte is onderstreep, maar Lexy kan die meeste daarvan nie lees nie. Haar ouma het probeer om haar te leer lees, maar Lexy het lankal ophou probeer. Skool was vir haar 'n bra sinnelose besigheid.

Sy gaan sit, uitgeput en naar van die skietery. Die Bybel lyk baie oud, en die letters is so klein dat haar ouma met 'n vergrootglas moet lees. Sy lees die woord aan die bokant van die bladsy: *Romeine*. Sy trek die Bybel nader en kyk na die onderstreepte deel, spel die woorde stadig uit: 'Verafsku wat sleg is en hou vas aan wat goed is.'

'n Snaakse gevoel neem van Lexy besit, asof iemand haar uit die skaduwee dophou. Verafsku wat sleg is? Is dit wat die Bybel sê? Sy kyk weer, en lees weer die woorde. Ja, dit is wat daar staan. Hou vas aan wat goed is. Lexy is nie seker hoe 'n mens dit doen nie. Dwayne sê altyd sy moenie voor die ander ouens aan hom vashou nie. Hy hou nie daarvan dat sy sy hand vashou of aan hom hang nie.

Sy laat die idee insink. Die Bybel sê sy moet slegte dinge verafsku, en vashou aan goeie dinge. Lexy sak laer af in die stoel en staar na die muur, eintlik net in die niet.

Demone of nie, haar lewe is gebou om dinge wat sleg is. Sy dink die meeste van die tyd nie so daaraan nie, maar vanaand? Toe sy gesien het hoe die kind van die EastTown Boyz reg voor haar sterf? Dit was sleg. Niemand kan dit ontken nie.

Maar wat van die goeie dinge? Lexy voel yskoud. Toe word sy kwaad, sodat haar gesigspiere styf trek. Wie probeer sy bluff? Daar is nêrens goeie dinge nie, nêrens nie. Haar ouma is goed, maar niemand anders nie. Wat kan 'n mens nou ook in 'n ou boek kry? 'n Mens moet dit seker glo, maar jy moet dit eers lees as jy wil hê dit moet 'n verskil maak.

Sy staan op en dink daaraan dat sy moet gaan slaap, maar sy kan nie. Sy kan nie ophou kyk na die Bybel, ophou dink aan die woorde wat haar ouma onderstreep het nie. Verafsku slegte dinge. Hou vas aan goeie dinge.

En skielik onthou sy.

Daar is iemand in hul buurt wat goed is, iemand wat dinge beter wil maak. Iemand wat omgee oor die stukkende kinders en die huise sonder ma's en pa's. Daar is iemand wat gewillig is om sy geld te gee sodat hulle lewe beter kan word.

Sy naam is Marcus Dillinger.

En môreand gaan Dwayne die leier van die WestKnights wees en Marcus net

nog 'n slagoffer. Nog 'n liggaam in 'n lykwa. Haar oë word vol trane. Sy kan dit keer. Al is daar hoeveel slegte dinge om haar, gaan sy aan die goeie vashou, al is dit net vir vanaand.

Sy grawe in haar handsak rond en kry 'n bietjie kleingeld. Geld wat sy by haar ouma gesteel het. Sy gryp die sak en gaan by die voordeur uit. Twee blokke verder is daar 'n kroeg met 'n openbare telefoon. Volgens wat sy gehoor het, kan hulle nie oproepe van daardie telefone af opspoor nie. As Dwayne hiervan moet hoor, sal hy haar doodmaak. Daaraan twyfel Lexy nie 'n oomblik nie.

Op pad ry vier verskillende motors stadig by haar verby. Die bestuurders lyk gereed vir 'n geveg. Almal van hulle koggel haar, maak suggestiewe opmerkings. Woorde wat haar laat dink aan al die kere toe sy dinge moes doen al wou sy nie.

Die trane loop stadig teen haar wange af. Sy is nie ontsteld nie, nie regtig nie. Sy is net kwaad vir Dwayne. Hy moes gesê het hy sal liever net die drie EastTown Boyz doodmaak, nie vir Marcus Dillinger nie.

Lexy vee die trane af, en begin vinnig loop. Die telefoonhokkie is nou naby. Sy kyk oor haar skouer, maar sien niemand nie, geen WestKnight wat kan klik nie. Sy tel die telefoon op en bel die polisie se noodnommer.

'n Vrou antwoord. 'Wat is die noodgeval?'

Wat is die noodgeval? Lexy se hele lyf bewe, en haar mond is so droog dat sy skaars die woorde kan uitkry. Sy voel die boosheid om haar, hoe dit nader kom. *Hou vas aan goeie dinge ... hou vas aan goeie dinge.*

Sy sluk 'n paar keer. 'Dis nie vandag 'n noodgeval nie.'

'Dame, u moet asseblief spesifiek wees.' Die vrou klink gefrustreerd, asof sy nie regtig omgee nie. 'Wat is die probleem?'

'Dit is ... Marcus Dillinger.' Haar hart klop so hard dat sy skaars haar eie woorde hoor. Twee ouens kom by die kroeg uit, net 'n paar tree van haar af.

Sy praat sagter. 'Marcus Dillinger, die bofbalspeler.'

'Ja.' Lexy kyk oor haar skouer. Sê nou iemand herken haar en sê vir Dwayne? Sy klou aan die gehoorstuk vas. *Komaan, wees dapper, Lexy, komaan.* Sy knyp haar oë toe en vind weer haar stem. 'Iemand van die WestKnights gaan Marcus Dillinger môreaand doodskiet. By die nuwe jeugsentrum.'

'Iemand gaan Marcus Dillinger doodskiet?'

'Ja.' Die vrees het haar beetgepak, kom van alle kante op haar afgestorm. Sy is mal om dit te doen. Hulle gaan haar ook doodmaak. 'Help hom asseblief.' Sy gooi die gehoorstuk neer en staar in die telefoonhokkie rond. Sy kry weer daardie gevoel. Daardie angswekkende een. Miskien is dit demone. Of mense agter haar wat haar bekruipt. Sy vlieg om, en daar is hulle. Drie EastTown Boyz, rooi bande om die kop, oë vol haat.

En hulle is op pad na haar toe.

Lexy druk met haar rug teen die koue metaal. Sy gaan nou hier doodgaan. Binne 'n paar minute.

'Jy is dood, WestKnight-meisie.' Die oudste een se oë is twee nou skrefies. 'Maar ons gaan eers bietjie met jou speel.'

Voordat Lexy kan skree, voordat sy vir hulle kan sê sy is nie bang nie, dat hulle kan doen wat hulle wil want sy is nie 'n lafaard nie, dat sy vir eenmaal in haar lewe aan die goeie vashou, voordat sy kan dink wat sy volgende moet doen, tree 'n yslike polisieman uit die skaduwees. Hy het breë skouers en langerige blonde hare.

'Gaan huis toe, outjies.' Sy stem is hard. So hard dat dit reg deur Lexy se siel daver.

Die EastTown Boyz draai na hom toe en een pluk 'n wapen uit. Maar die polisieman kom eenvoudig aangestap, reg op hulle af. Sy oë is helder, soos iets bonatuurliks in 'n fliek. Hy knip nie sy oë nie. Kom net nader, stadig en ernstig. 'Ek het gesê ... gaan huis toe. Julle wil dit nie doen nie.'

'Stop, poot, of ek skiet!'

Die polisieman lyk meer soos 'n berg as 'n mens, hoe nader hy kom. 'Nou toe, skiet.' Hy kom staan voor Lexy. Hy is so groot dat sy nie die ouens voor hom kan sien nie. Toe haal hy 'n knuppel uit. 'Moenie vir my 'n rede gee nie.' 'Kyk, man, jy is nie van hier rond nie.' Een van die EastTown Boyz lag. 'Jy's die een wat moet huis toe gaan.'

'In die Naam van Jesus.' Sy stem is nou sagter, kalm en anders. Lexy het nog nooit so iets gehoor nie. Die man lig sy knuppel op. 'Gaan nou.'

'n Knuppel teen 'n pistool? Lexy reken die EastTown Boyz sal eenvoudig skiet. Maar sy hoor skoene oor die teer skuifel. Lexy loer om die man en sien hoe die drie vinnig retireer, vrees in hulle oë. Toe draai hulle om en begin hardloop. Die een met die pistool gaan staan, draai om en skiet na die polisieman.

Reguit na hom.

Maar die polisieman staan net daar.

Lexy snak na haar asem. 'Wat ... waar is die koeël?' Wat het so pas gebeur? Lexy voel iets wat sy nog nooit ervaar het nie. Miskien is dit vrede. Of troos. Wie is hierdie man? Wat het hy gesê? In die Naam van Jesus? Polisiemanne praat mos nie so nie. Sy loop om hom en staar hom aan.

Die polisieman luister nie na haar nie. Hy kyk na die EastTown Boyz, kyk tot die werklikheid hulle tref: Dit was asof die koeël reg deur hom gegaan het en toe van die muur af weggeskram het.

Hulle draai weer om en hardloop straat af tot hulle buite sig is.

Eers toe draai die polisieman na haar toe en sit sy hand op haar skouer. 'Alles is reg. Jy moet by die huis kom.'

Die man se oë het honderde kleure. Groen en blou en selfs 'n soort wit lig.
'Wie ... is jy?'

'Offisier Jag.'

Sy sien sy naam op sy uniform. J-a-g. 'Hoe het jy geweet ek het hulp nodig?'
'Lexy.' Die man is kalm. 'God sien jou hart. Hy het 'n plan met jou.' Offisier Jag kyk in die straat af en toe na die kroeg 'n paar tree weg. Toe kyk hy weer na Lexy, en sy oë is hartseer. 'God se plan met jou ... is baie groter as hierdie dinge.'

Lexy sluk. Sy weet nie wat om te sê nie. 'Hoe weet jy wat my naam is?'

'Kom saam.' Hy lyk kwaai toe hy in die rigting van haar ouma se huis begin loop. 'Bly by my. Jy moet by die huis kom.'

Die polisieman stap saam met haar. Lexy verstaan niks van wat pas gebeur het nie. 'Hoe ken jy my naam?'

'Die eintlike vraag is: Waarom is jy saam met Dwayne Davis?' Hy kyk af na haar, sy oë vriendelik soos in die begin.

Lexy gaan staan en sê afgemete: 'Dwayne is die een vir my.'

'Nee.' Offisier Jag skud sy kop. 'Dwayne werk vir die vyand. As jy by hom bly, gaan hy jou vernietig.'

Niemand het nog ooit in haar hele lewe so met haar gepraat nie, asof daar regtig 'n plan vir haar lewe is, asof God weet wie sy is. Hulle kom by haar ouma se huis en die polisieman gaan na die voordeur toe. 'Dink na oor wat ek gesê het, Lexy.' Hy kyk reg deur haar. 'En bly binne.'

'Goed.'

'Jou ouma se Bybel praat die waarheid. Haat alles wat sleg is. Hou vas aan goeie dinge. Soos daardie oproep wat jy oor Marcus Dillinger gemaak het.' Die polisieman loop by die trappies af. 'Jy kan kies hoe jy wil lewe.'

Lexy voel koue rillings in haar arms en bene. 'Hoe het jy ...' Maar sy kan nie die sin klaar maak nie. Alles is net te vreemd. Asof dit 'n nagmerrie is. Sy kyk hom agterna toe hy omdraai en stadig wegstap. Toe gaan sy vinnig in, maak die deur toe en sluit dit.

En toe besef sy verskillende dinge gelyk. Die polisieman het nie 'n motor nie, nie sover sy kon sien nie. En hy was alleen. Iets wat polisiemanne nooit in hierdie buurt doen nie. En bowenal: Hoe het hy dit reggekry om 'n koeël met sy kaal hand te vang?

'n Gedagte skiet haar te binne, so skielik dat haar mond vir 'n oomblik oophang. Sê nou offisier Jag is 'n engel? Wat vir haar kom vertel het om die slegte te haat en aan die goeie vas te hou? Net soos haar ouma se Bybel 'n halfuur gelede gesê het? Sy dink daaroor na. 'n Engel met die naam Jag wat 'n polisie-uniform dra en koeëls kan vang? Kan nie wees nie. Net soos die demone wat sy haar vroeër vanaand verbeel het. Die hele ding is net haar

verbeelding. Seker omdat sy gesien het hoe daardie kind doodgaan. Asof dit haar 'n bietjie mal gemaak het. Ja, dit is wat dit is. Sy is net 'n bietjie mallerig. Miskien gaan sy nou-nou haar oë oopmaak en sien sy is in haar bed. Lexy knip haar oë 'n paar keer en kyk om haar rond. Dis net, sy is nie in haar bed nie.

Sy gaan sit weer by die kombuistafel en trek die Bybel nader. Sy vryf stadig met haar duim oor die sagte papier. Die Bybel is te oud, dit kan nie meer saak maak nie. Lexy ervaar skielik die realiteit van haar situasie soos nooit tevore nie. Sy het haar goeie daad gedoen. Sy het die polisie gebel en hulle van Marcus Dillinger vertel.

Offisier Jag het gesê sy kan kies om goeie dinge te doen.

Maar hy is verkeerd. Wat moet sy miskien doen? 'n Ander gesin soek? Sy is 'n WestKnights-meisie. Daar is geen uitkomekans nie, al wil sy hoe graag. Sy borsel haar tande en gaan lê op haar bed, maar sy kan nie aan die slaap raak nie.

Die man se gesig, sy oë, bly in haar gedagtes. Soos 'n Instagram-foto in haar kop. Watter soort mens kan 'n koeël vang? Of haar naam reg raai? En hoe het hy geweet wat sy in haar ouma se Bybel gelees het? Miskien is hy 'n towenaar of iets. Miskien is sy op werklikheidstelevisie. Daar moet die een of ander verklaring wees.

Want engele en demone bestaan mos nie, God ook nie.

Die strate is genoeg bewys daarvan.

12



MARCUS HAD A HEAVY heart as he arrived at Chairis Youth Center at just after four o'clock and found the paint buckets in the back closet. A twelve-year-old boy had been killed the previous night, one of the EastTown kids. Police had ruled it a gang killing, probably for points. Gang members ranked themselves by the points they accumulated.

The murder made Marcus sick to his stomach.

He carried the paint to a worktable in the room that needed the most help. As he did he smiled at volunteers working throughout the building. More volunteers than before. The community was behind his efforts. They had

opened the place at two that afternoon, and now tutors at several tables were helping kids with homework.

The dream was coming true. Just not fast enough.

Before he could brainstorm ways to keep kids like the twelve-year-old murder victim off the streets, Marcus had to finish the work at hand. In the conversion of the old warehouse to a youth center, several rooms still needed painting to cover up a decade of graffiti and desperation. Tyler, Sami, and Mary Catherine planned to show up around five to help, and by seven o'clock kids would start arriving for pickup basketball and pizza.

Given the gang situation, police and a few volunteer high school basketball coaches would be on hand—to keep the teams fair. The pizza was set to arrive around seven thirty and the activities would wrap up a few hours later. Marcus had been looking forward to this Tuesday for weeks.

Yes, it was a school night. But on the streets kids stayed out till far later regardless of school in the morning. This was one way to give them an alternative. A way to say no to the gangs that were ever willing to accept them.

Marcus made a few trips from the closet to the table getting the cans of paint and brushes and buckets set out. All the while Marcus thought about the murdered boy. What if the center had opened sooner? The kid might've found his way through the doors and never looked back.

He might be alive today.

Marcus was organizing the paint according to room when he heard the sounds of his friends. Mostly Mary Catherine, her voice, her laugh. She hadn't been far from his mind since Saturday night. And while he'd fielded dozens of texts from Shelly in that time, he hadn't heard from Mary Catherine at all.

Another reason why she was special.

They entered the room, dressed in old T-shirts and sweatpants. "A-One Painting Crew at your service!" Tyler had his arm around Sami's shoulders. "Fastest painters in Los Angeles." He grinned at Sami and Mary Catherine.

"That's right. Don't blink." Sami laughed. "The whole place'll be painted."

Mary Catherine looked happy, relaxed. And when her eyes met his, Marcus could feel the same pull, the same attraction from the other night. The chemistry between them made him dizzy. He gave Tyler and Sami a hug as the three approached but when it came to Mary Catherine, he hesitated, slightly awkward.

She sidestepped him. "I get first dibs on the brushes." She grinned. "It's all about the brushes."

"I've heard." He stepped back. Why hadn't he hugged her? Not the other

night and not now? He tried not to feel frustrated. Of course he hadn't hugged her. He had a girlfriend and she wasn't interested. Or she wouldn't be if she knew his past.

They got busy, filling trays with paint and dividing the work. Before they started covering the walls, Marcus told them about the boy killed last night.

The news hit them hard. Tyler gritted his teeth. "That's why we gotta get this thing up and running. Kids killing kids. It has to stop."

"They need another way of living." Sami took Tyler's hand. "It's just so sad. Such a waste."

Mary Catherine stayed quiet. She looked at her paint, stirring it slowly. Whatever she was thinking, she didn't say it. Marcus hoped he would have time to ask her later. She cared so much about making a difference. Did the recent violence make her want to do more? Or find somewhere else to serve?

Marcus had a feeling it was the latter.

They started painting, and gradually the mood lightened. Tyler and Sami were amazed by home church at the Waynes' house a few days ago. "I never thought about the family of Jesus like that." Tyler seemed like he was really thinking about the teaching that day. "The cost of being connected to Jesus had to be so great. So emotional. I guess it makes the Bible feel a lot more real."

Marcus agreed. The Sunday service at the Waynes' house had been tremendous. He only wished Mary Catherine had come. But her work with kids at her church was important. She wasn't going to miss that. She cared too much for those kids. And these kids.

Which was the real reason she was here. No matter what attraction Marcus felt between them.

Sometime before seven, Shamika and her little boy, Jalen, showed up to help paint. Jalen wanted to play basketball, but his mom explained that tonight was for the big kids.

"You know what, though, buddy?" Marcus cleaned his hands on a rag and stooped down to the boy's level. "I bet I can find that other hoop for you. We have room right here for a little pickup game."

"Really?" Jalen's eyes lit up. "Can I, Mama?" He turned his bright brown eyes up to Shamika.

She laughed lightly and shook her head. "Marcus, you don't have to do that. We're here to help paint. He knows that."

"Yeah, but a guy has to play hoops." Marcus winked at Jalen. "Right, buddy?"

"Right!" The boy fist-bumped Marcus.

Hope infused Marcus's troubled heart. Playing ball with Jalen later would

be fun. He found the junior hoop and set it up in the middle of the room so Jalen could play while his mom painted. Marcus was handing a small basketball to Jalen when he felt someone watching him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Mary Catherine looking right at him.

Their eyes met and she smiled. Then without a word she returned to her painting. No, the two of them would never date. But Mary Catherine was becoming his friend. And despite the way his heart skipped when she walked into the room, he welcomed her friendship. At least that.

The teens started arriving before seven, hanging around the gym and talking about the teams. A few minutes later the coaches showed up. Without supervision, a pickup basketball game could easily become a reason to fight.

A reason to kill.

But with it . . . well, Marcus could only hope that this might be a place the kids could get their aggression out, a way they could move and compete and connect without bringing the gangs and guns into it.

As Marcus expected, the kids who showed up that night were young. He looked at the teams as the first game started. He'd have been surprised if any of them were older than fifteen.

"Good turnout." Marcus was standing next to Tyler, watching the coaches working with the players. "Thirty-three kids."

Tyler smiled. "Thirty-three boys who won't be hanging with a gang tonight."

A dozen or so girls gathered along the sidelines. Two more played with the guys on the floor. By the time the games were under way, it was almost seven thirty. The pizza would be there any minute.

Marcus watched, and deep satisfaction welled within him. *God, if you would please bless this youth center. He studied the kids, willing a change for them. Give these kids a reason to believe in life, in people. A reason to believe in You. And help me know how we can really change things here in the—*

"Marcus!"

His prayer cut short, Marcus turned around. Officer Charlie Kent looked in a hurry as he walked up. His partner hung back, talking to Tyler, Sami, and Mary Catherine.

Marcus felt his heart sink. "More trouble?" He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. There was no relief around here.

"Always." The officer folded his arms and looked squarely at Marcus. His voice was as angry as it was defeated. He was careful to let no one else hear him. "We got a tip yesterday. The WestKnights have a contract on you. They're planning to take you out tonight."

"Me?" A partial laugh came from Marcus, but only out of disbelief. "Why

would they wanna kill me?"

"Who knows. The WestKnights lost their leader this past week in a drive-by. Gangs do deadly things when a position is at stake. Sounds like that's what this is."

"The shooting yesterday, the twelve-year-old kid? Was that a part of this?"

"Probably." The officer shook his head. "We're close to making an arrest. A kid named Dwayne Davis. Has a list of robberies and attempted murder charges. We think he's the shooter from last night."

"So . . ." Marcus didn't understand. "Can't you arrest him?"

"It's not that easy. These guys don't have a residence. They're always moving, living on someone's floor. Every door we knock on has a bunch of armed kids."

Marcus nodded. The danger was worse than anything he ever imagined. It made him wonder—just for a moment—if he'd picked the wrong city to build the youth center. He could've built this in the suburbs and at least there wouldn't be bullets flying out front.

Maybe this was a mistake. If someone wanted to kill him for trying to help, then—

No, he told himself. *Don't think like that.*

God had given him this idea. The Lord had provided the broken down warehouse, the funds to renovate it, and the volunteers to help staff it. There was a reason he was supposed to be here. He looked out at the action on the basketball court, even as the officer kept talking, warning him about the dynamics between the rival gangs in the area.

But all Marcus could think about were the kids on the court. That's why he was here. Threats of violence wouldn't make him give up. He'd simply have to be careful. He turned to the officer. "What should I do?"

"The front of the building will be the most dangerous. We have officers patrolling, looking for Davis. But we think maybe you should call it an early night."

Marcus hesitated. He hated breaking up the basketball game. Hated letting the gangs win—even for a night. Any minute the pizza would be here. He clenched his jaw, frustrated. He couldn't put the kids and volunteers at risk. He stared at the officer. "Whatever we need to do."

The officer studied the teens on the court. "Let's dismiss them after this game."

"What about the pizza? It'll be here any minute."

"Maybe they can grab a piece on the way out. Then we can shut down." He pulled his radio from his belt. "I'll call for additional backup until everyone's cleared out."

Marcus studied the kids again. They had no idea their fun tonight was about to come to an abrupt end. Marcus looked across the room at the faces of his friends. The other officer was talking to them and by the look on their faces, they knew about the threat.

A thought occurred to him. Now he wouldn't get to play with little Jalen, either. Everyone would have to go home. He looked over at the junior hoop, but Shamika and Jalen were nowhere to be seen. Marcus had a strange feeling about the mother and son. He hadn't seen them in several minutes. "Hold on." He nodded to the officer. "I have to find someone."

He turned to jog toward the back room where the water bottles were set up, but then something caught his eye. He turned and watched Shamika and Jalen walk toward the entrance of the center. Shamika saw him and waved. "The pizza's here! Me and Jalen are gonna help bring it inside."

"No!" Marcus shouted, but it was too late. Shamika and Jalen were already through the front door.

Marcus ran for the door and tore outside into the night. The pizza guy was out of the car, a stack of boxes in his hands. Cars seemed to be everywhere, cruising down the street, parked across from the center. Marcus could feel the danger, he could sense it to the core of his being.

But where was it coming from?

Suddenly out of the shadows, a woman lunged at him. "Get down!"

Everything happened so fast, the action around Marcus became a blur. He heard gunfire and the sound of squealing tires and felt something burning in his leg. Before he could register any of it, he heard Shamika scream.

"Jalen! No, not my boy! God, please!"

Marcus scrambled to his knees and the pain sliced through his leg. He looked down and saw blood coming from his thigh. *Flesh wound*, he told himself. But Jalen . . . What had happened to the child?

Volunteers were shouting and sirens sounded in the distance. But what about Jalen? Marcus pulled himself to his feet and pushed through the crowd. "Jalen!"

Shamika was still screaming. "Someone help us! No, God, not my boy! Please not my boy!"

Marcus could see him. There was blood everywhere as he knelt next to Shamika. Jalen wasn't moving and now Marcus could see where the blood was coming from. The boy had been hit in the back of his head. He had probably turned when he heard Marcus yell and now . . .

Dear God, no . . . not this child, please! "Has someone called nine-one-one?" he shouted, desperate.

"They're on their way," one of the parent volunteers answered.

Across from him working on the child was the woman who had knocked him to the ground. It was Aspyn. One of the volunteers. She had her hands on Jalen's chest, giving him CPR. Then, as if she could sense Marcus looking at her—despite the screaming and crying happening all around—she looked straight at him. "Pray." She continued her efforts to save Jalen's life. "Pray for the boy. Pray in Jesus' name."

Marcus stared at the boy. Someone had to stop the bleeding. He took off his shirt and put it against the child's head. He didn't know CPR, but Aspyn seemed capable.

Pressing the shirt against the boy's skull, Marcus tuned out the wailing and shouting and took hold of Shamika's hand. "Let's pray."

"I can't lose him!" Her words were a panicked scream. "He's all I have. Please . . . God, please!"

Marcus had never been in a situation like this. He wanted to rewind the clock and have this moment over again. If only he could've stopped Shamika before she walked outside. The bullet intended for him had hit Jalen instead. It was more than he could bear.

But even with all of that, even desperate for Jalen to survive, Marcus knew Aspyn was right. They had to pray. The blood was spreading. He couldn't watch. Marcus closed his eyes and raised his voice, raised it above the crying and shouting and sounds of the approaching sirens. "We need a miracle, Lord. Please, don't let him die. Please . . . save his life. Please, help us! God, I beg you!"

Shamika was sobbing now, but she managed to say, "Amen. Jesus, please, amen."

The ambulance pulled up and paramedics rushed through the crowd. Marcus sat back on the grass and watched as Jalen was whisked onto a stretcher. Shamika stayed with him, running alongside the men as they took her baby to the ambulance.

He should've taken that bullet. Not Jalen.

Behind him he heard Tyler's voice. But at the same time another set of paramedics rushed up and surrounded him. "Marcus, you've been hit. You need to get to the hospital."

His leg? He wanted to tell them he'd be fine. "Go find the shooter. Someone find him!" That's all that mattered now.

Tyler was at his side. "Man, it's a nasty wound. You gotta get in."

"The boy . . ." Marcus stared at the place where the ambulance carrying Jalen had disappeared. "Pray for the boy."

"We will." Tyler squeezed his shoulder. "I'll bring Sami and Mary Catherine. We'll meet you at the hospital."

The paramedics lifted him onto the stretcher. Marcus looked back as they carried him toward a second ambulance and a sudden thought hit him. What about Aspyn? How had the woman known Marcus was about to be hit? She had shoved him to the ground and then just as quickly she was at Jalen's side doing CPR. As if she'd known all this was about to happen. Was she someone connected to the gang? Did she have inside information?

Marcus would tell the police to talk to her. Just in case she knew something. In case she could lead them to the shooter. He scanned the crowd looking for her. Aspyn had volunteered at the center Saturday night. She was a pretty woman, thin with long, straightened hair and green eyes. She must've gone back inside the building.

Because she was nowhere in sight.

The paramedics loaded Marcus into the waiting ambulance and he closed his eyes. How could this have happened? It was supposed to be a fun night for the kids. This was supposed to help the gang problem here on the streets of LA. Everything they'd done, the time and money and prayers for this place. It was supposed to make a difference.

Instead, little Jalen was fighting for his life.

Hoofstuk 12

~

M

arcus kom net na vieruur met 'n swaar hart by die Chairis Jeugsentrum aan en gaan haal die verblikke in 'n agterkamer. 'n Twaalfjarige seun, een van die EastTown Boyz, is die vorige nag geskiet. Die polisie beskou dit as 'n bende moord, waarskynlik vir punte. Bende lede se plek op die ranglys word deur hul punte bepaal.

Die moord laat Marcus siek voel.

Hy dra die verf na 'n tafel in die vertrek waar die verf die nodigste is. In die loop glimlag hy vir die vrywilligers wat oral aan die werk is. Meer as vantevore. Die gemeenskap staan agter hom. Hulle het die deure om 14:00 oopgemaak en daar is reeds verskeie tutors wat kinders met hul huiswerk help.

Sy droom is besig om waar te word. Net nie vinnig genoeg nie.

Maar voordat hulle planne kan beraam om kinders soos die twaalfjarige slagoffer van die strate af te hou, moet Marcus eers sy verfwerk klaarmaak.

Daar is nog verskeie vertrekke in die ou pakhuis wat in 'n jeugsentrum omskep is waar meer as 'n dekade se graffiti en desperaatheid toegeverf moet word. Tyler, Sami en Mary Catherine sal ongeveer vyfuur kom help, en teen sewe-uur sal die kinders begin opdaag vir basketbal en pizza.

Gegewe die bende-situasie sal polisiemanne en hoërskoolafrigters byderhand wees, laasgenoemde om toe te sien dat die basketbalspelery vreedsaam verloop. Die pizza is veronderstel om teen halfagt afgelewer te word en die sentrum sal 'n paar uur later vir die aand sluit. Marcus sien al weke lank uit na hierdie aand.

Ja, dit is 'n weeksaand. Maar in hierdie buurt is die kinders in elk geval laataand nog op straat, of daar skool is of nie. Die sentrum is een manier om 'n alternatief vir hulle te skep. 'n Manier om nee te sê vir die bendes wat altyd gewillig is om hulle in te neem.

Marcus loop 'n paar keer na die kas waar die verblikke, kwaste en emmers gebêre word. Die vermoorde seun bly maar in sy gedagtes. Sê nou die sentrum het al vroeër oopgemaak? Die kind kon dalk sy weg deur die oop deur gevind het, en veilig hier geskuil het.

Hy kon vandag nog gelewe het.

Marcus is besig om die verf in die verskillende vertrekke uit te sit toe hy sy vriende hoor aankom. Eintlik veral Mary Catherine se stem en lag. Sedert Saterdag was sy nooit heeltemal uit sy gedagtes nie. En alhoewel hy in die paar dae al dosyne SMS'e van Shelly gekry het, het hy niks van Mary Catherine gehoor nie.

Nog 'n rede waarom sy spesiaal is. Hulle kom in ou T-hemde en sweetpakbroeke geklee die vertrek binne. 'A1-verfspan tot jou diens!' Tyler se arm is om Sami se skouers. 'Vinnigste verwers in Los Angeles.' Hy kyk met 'n glimlag na Sami en Mary Catherine.

'Reg. Moenie jou oë knip nie.' Sami lag. 'Die hele plek sal klaar geverf wees.'

Mary Catherine lyk gelukkig, ontspanne. En toe hul oë ontmoet, voel Marcus dieselfde aangetrokkenheid as die vorige keer. Die vonk tussen hulle laat hom duiselig voel. Hy gee Sami en Tyler elk 'n drukkie, maar toe hy voor Mary Catherine staan, huiwer hy, effens ongemaklik.

Sy systap hom. 'Ek kies eerste 'n kwas.' Sy lag. 'Dit gaan alles oor die regte kwas.'

'Hulle sê so.' Hy staan terug. Waarom het hy haar nie 'n drukkie gegee nie? Nie Saterdagmiddag nie en ook nie nou nie? Hy probeer om nie gefrustreerd te voel nie. Natuurlik gee hy nie vir haar drukkie nie. Hy het 'n meisie en sy is nie geïnteresseerd in hom nie. En sal sekerlik nie wees as sy van sy verlede weet nie.

Hulle begin werk, maak verfanne vol en deel die werk uit. Voordat hulle begin, vertel Marcus hulle van die seun wat die vorige nag doodgeskiet is.

Die nuus tref hulle met 'n slag. Tyler byt op sy tande. 'Dis waarom ons hierdie plek aan die gang moet kry. Kinders wat kinders doodmaak. Ons moet dit keer.'

'Hulle het 'n ander manier van lewe nodig.' Sami neem Tyler se hand. 'Dis so hartseer. So 'n verlies.'

Mary Catherine bly stil. Sy kyk na haar verf, en roer dit stadig. Sy sê nie wat sy dink nie. Marcus hoop hy sal later 'n kans kry om haar te vra. Dit is vir haar belangrik om 'n verskil te maak. Dring die onlangse geweld haar om meer te doen? Of is dit besig om haar weg te dryf om elders te gaan dien? Marcus het 'n gevoel dit is laasgenoemde.

Hulle begin verf, en geleidelik begin hul bui lig. Tyler en Sami is opgewonde oor die huiskerk by die Waynes. 'Ek het nooit so oor Jesus se familie gedink nie.' Dit lyk asof Tyler regtig nagedink het oor die dinge wat hy geleer het. 'En dat die prys om in Jesus te glo so groot moet wees. En so emosioneel. Ek dink dit maak die Bybel baie meer werklik.'

Marcus stem saam. Die Sondagkerk by die Waynes se huis was wonderlik. Hy wens net Mary Catherine was ook daar. Maar haar werk met die kinders by haar kerk is vir haar belangrik. Sy wil dit nie misloop nie. Sy gee te veel vir hulle om. En ook vir hierdie kinders.

En dit, sê Marcus vir homself, is waarom sy hier is. Al voel hy ook 'n vonk tussen hulle twee, al is hy seker hulle is aangetrokke tot mekaar.

Net voor sewe kom Shamika en haar seuntjie, Jalen, daar aan. Jalen wil basketbal speel, maar sy ma verduidelik dat dit vanaand die groot kinders se beurt is.

'Ja, maar weet jy wat?' Marcus vee sy hande aan 'n lap af en buk af tot hy net so hoog soos Jalen is. 'Ek dink ek kan vir jou 'n korf kry. Ons het plek vir ons eie speletjie hier in hierdie kamer.'

'Regtig?' Jalen se oë blink. 'Kan ek, Mamma?' Hy kyk met blink bruin oë na sy ma.

Sy lag 'n bietjie en skud haar kop. 'Marcus, jy hoef dit nie te doen nie. Ons is hier om te help verf. Jalen weet.'

'Ja, maar ons ouens moet balle gooi.' Marcus knipoog vir Jalen. 'Wat sê jy, my vriend?'

'Ja!' die seuntjie stamp sy vuus teen Marcus s'n.

'n Sprankie hoop vlam op in Marcus se gekwelde hart. Dit sal lekker wees om saam met Jalen te speel. Hy gaan haal die laerskoolkorf en stel dit in die middel van die kamer op sodat Jalen balle kan gooi terwyl sy ma verf. Toe Marcus die klein basketbal vir Jalen gee, voel hy aan dat iemand hom dophou.

Hy kyk oor sy skouer en sien dis Mary Catherine wat reguit na hom kyk. Hulle oë ontmoet en sy glimlag. Toe gaan sy sonder 'n verdere woord aan met haar verfwerk. Nee, hulle twee sal nie uitgaan nie. Maar Mary Catherine is besig om sy vriendin te word. En ten spyte daarvan dat sy hart wil gaan stilstaan wanneer sy by 'n vertrek inkom, is hy bly oor haar vriendskap. Dat hy ten minste dit het.

Die tieners begin al voor seweur aankom. Hulle staan rond en gesels. 'n Paar minute later kom die afrigters. Sonder hul toesig kan impromptu basketbal maklik tot 'n bakleiery lei.

Wat in 'n skietery kan ontaard.

Maar met die afrigters daar ... Marcus hoop dat dit 'n plek sal word waar die kinders van hul aggressie ontslae kan raak, waar hulle kan kompeteer en mekaar kan leer ken sonder dat bendes en wapens ter sprake kom.

Soos Marcus verwag het, is dit meestal die jonger kinders wat opdaag. Hy kyk na die eerste spanne wat begin speel. Hy sal verbaas wees as een van die kinders ouer as vyftien is.

'Goeie opkoms.' Marcus staan langs Tyler, en hulle kyk hoe die afrigters met die kinders werk. 'Drie-en-dertig kinders.'

Tyler glimlag. 'Drie-en-dertig seuns wat nie vanaand saam met die bendes gaan rondhang nie.'

Daar is 'n klompie meisies wat staan en kyk, en twee wat saamspeel. Teen die tyd dat die wedstryde aan die gang kom, is dit byna halfagt. Die pizza kan enige oomblik afgelewer word.

Marcus staan en kyk, en voel diep tevrede. *Here, seën hierdie jeugsentrum.* Hy bestudeer die kinders, wil dat hulle sal verander. *Gee hierdie kinders 'n rede om in die lewe, in mense, te glo. 'n Rede om in U te glo. En help my om te weet hoe ons die dinge regtig kan ...*

'Marcus!' onderbreek 'n stem sy gebed.

Hy kyk om en sien offisier Charlie Kent haastig naderkom. Sy maat staan en gesels met Tyler, Sami en Mary Catherine.

Marcus kan voel hoe sy hart ineenkrimp. 'Nog moeilikheid?' Hy vee sy voorkop met die agterkant van sy hand af. Daar is ook nooit tyd vir ontspan nie.

'Soos gewoonlik.' Die polisieman vou sy arms en kyk Marcus vierkantig in die oë. Sy stem is kwaad en verslae. Hy praat sag sodat niemand anders hom hoor nie. 'Ons het nou net 'n wenk gekry. Die WestKnights het jou in hul visier. Hulle beplan om jou vanaand te skiet.'

'Vir my?' Marcus lag in ongeloof. 'Waarom wil hulle my doodmaak?'

'Wie weet? Die WestKnights se leiers is verlede week in 'n verbyry doodgeskiet. Bendes doen gevaarlike goed as 'n posisie oopgeval het. Klink

my dit maak deel daarvan uit.'

'Die geskiet gisternag, die twaalfjarige kind – was dit ook 'n deel daarvan?'

'Waarskynlik.' Die polisieman skud sy kop. 'Ons is amper gereed om 'n arrestasie te maak. 'n Kind met die naam Dwayne Davis. Hy het al 'n lys inbrake en pogings tot moord teen hom. Ons dink dis hy wat die kind geskiet het.'

'Maar ...' Marcus verstaan nie. 'Kan julle hom nie net arresteer nie?'

'Dis nie so maklik nie. Die ouens het nie 'n vaste woonplek nie. Hulle is die hele tyd aan die beweeg, bly tydelik by mense. Agter elke deur waar ons aanklop, is 'n klomp gewapende kinders.'

Marcus knik. Die gevaar is groter as wat hy gedink het. Dit laat hom wonder – net vir 'n oomblik – of hy die verkeerde plek gekies het vir sy jeugsentrum. Hy kon dit in die voorstede gedoen het. Dan was daar ten minste nie koeëls wat links en regs deur die lug vlieg nie.

Miskien was dit 'n fout. As iemand hom wil doodmaak net omdat hy hulle wil help –

Nee, sê hy vir homself. Nee. Moenie so begin dink nie.

God het hom hierdie plan gegee. Die Here het die ou pakhuis voorsien, en ook die fondse om dit te restoureer, en vrywilligers om te kom help om dit te beman. Daar is 'n rede waarom hy juis hier moet wees. Hy kyk na die kinders op die basketbalbane terwyl die polisieman hom waarsku oor die wedywing tussen die twee opponerende bendes van die gebied.

En al waaraan hy kan dink, is die kinders op die baan. Dit is waarom hy hier is. Dreigemente van geweld gaan hom nie laat ophou nie. Hy moet eenvoudig versigtig wees. Hy draai na die polisieman. 'Wat moet ek doen?'

'Die voorkant van die gebou is die gevaarlikste. Daar is polisiemanne wat die gebied patroleer, en na Davis soek. Maar ons dink jy moet die kinders vanaand vroeg huis toe stuur.'

Marcus huiwer. Hy haat dit om die basketbalwedstryd ontydig stop te sit. Hy haat dit dat die bendes toegelaat word om te wen – selfs vir een aand. Die pizza kan enige oomblik kom. Hy byt op sy tande, gefrustreerd. Hy kan ook nie die kinders en vrywilligers in gevaar stel nie. Hy staar die polisieman aan. 'Wat jy ook al dink nodig is.'

Die man kyk na die tieners op die basketbalbaan. 'Kom ons stuur hulle na die wedstryd huis toe.'

'Wat van die pizza? Dit kan nou enige oomblik kom.'

'Miskien moet elkeen op pad uit 'n stuk vat. Dan kan ons hier toemaak.' Hy haal sy radio uit. 'Ek sal bykomende bystand aanvra tot almal huis toe is.'

Marcus kyk weer na die kinders. Hulle besef nie dat hul aand tot 'n skielike einde gaan kom nie. Marcus kyk na sy vriende aan die ander kant van die

vertrek. Die ander polisieman is aan die praat, en volgens hul gesigte weet hulle ook van die dreigement.

Hy dink skielik aan iets. Hy sal ook nie met Jalen kan speel nie. Almal sal moet huis toe gaan. Hy kyk na die laerskoolkorf, maar sien nie vir Shamika en Jalen nie. 'n Onrustigheid pak hom beet. Hy het hulle 'n hele rukkie laas gesien. 'Wag net 'n bietjie.' Hy knik vir die polisieman. 'Ek moet iemand gaan soek.'

Marcus wil vinnig in die agterste vertrekke gaan soek, daar waar die waterbottels is, maar iets vang sy oog. Hy draai om en sien hoe Shamika en Jalen na die voordeur toe loop. Shamika sien hom en waai. 'Die pizza het gekom! Ek en Jalen gaan gou help om dit in te bring.'

'Nee, moenie!' roep Marcus, maar dit is te laat. Shamika en Jalen is reeds by die deur uit.

Marcus hardloop na die deur toe en na buite. Die pizza-man staan langs sy motor, 'n stapel bokse in sy hande. Dit lyk asof die plek van die motors wemel, aan die ry in die straat en oorkant die straat geparkeer. Marcus voel die gevaar, hy voel dit in sy diepste wese aan.

Maar waar kom dit vandaan?

Skielik skree 'n vrou: 'Val plat!' Sy bestorm hom vanuit die donkerte en duik hom plat.

Alles gebeur vinnig, in 'n waas. Marcus hoor 'n skoot, en die geluid van skreeuende bande. Hy voel hoe sy been brand. Maar voordat dit kan registreer, hoor hy hoe Shamika skreeu.

'Jalen! Nie my seuntjie nie! Here, asseblief!'

Marcus gaan staan op sy knieë, en pyn skiet deur sy been. Hy kyk af en sien hoe die bloed by sy bobeen afloop. *Vleiswond*, dink hy. *Maar Jalen ... wat het met Jalen gebeur?*

Die vrywilligers skree en roep en hy hoor sirenes in die verte. Waar is Jalen? Marcus trek homself regop en stoot deur die mense. 'Jalen!'

Shamika huil nog. 'Help ons. Here, nie my seuntjie nie! Asseblief nie my seuntjie nie!'

Marcus sien hom. Die bloed is oral. Hy kniel langs Shamika. Jalen lê doodstil en Marcus sien waar die bloed vandaan kom: Hy is in die agterkant van sy kop getref. Hy het seker omgedraai toe hy Marcus hoor skree, en nou ...

Liewe Here, nee ... nie hierdie kind nie, asseblief! 'Het iemand die nooddiens gebel?' roep hy desperaat.

'Hulle is op pad,' sê een van die vrywilliger-ouers.

Oorkant hom is die vrou wat hom platgeduik het. Sy pas eerstehulp toe op Jalen. Dis Aspyn, een van die vrywilligers. Haar hand is op Jalen se borskas, en sy is besig met KPR. Dis asof sy aanvoel dat Marcus na haar kyk, en te

midde van die geskreeu en geraas en gehuil om hulle kyk sy reguit na hom. ‘Bid.’ Sy sit haar hand op Shamika se knie. ‘Bid vir jou seun. Bid in Jesus se Naam.’

Daarmee sit sy haar mond oor Jalen s’n en blaas lug in sy lugweë. Marcus staar na die seun. Iemand moet die bloeding stop. Hy trek sy hemp uit en hou dit teen die seun se kop. Hy kan nie KPR doen nie, maar dit lyk asof Aspyn presies weet wat sy doen.

Terwyl hy die hemp teen die kind se wond druk, skakel hy doelbewus die lawaai om hulle uit en neem Shamika se hand. ‘Kom ons bid.’

‘Ek kan hom nie verloor nie!’ Hy hoor die paniek in haar stem. ‘Hy is al wat ek het. Asseblief ... Here, asseblief!’

Marcus was nog nooit in so ’n situasie nie. Hy wil die horlosie terugdraai en die oomblik oordoen. Hy moes Shamika gekeer het toe sy wou uitgaan. Die koeël wat vir hom bedoel was, het Jalen getref. Dit is ’n ondraaglike besef.

Maar ten spyte daarvan, en al is hy hoe desperaat dat Jalen moet lewe, is Aspyn reg. Hulle moet bid. Die bloed is besig om deur sy hemp te versprei. Hy kan dit nie aanskou nie. Hy maak sy oë toe en praat hard, sodat dit bokant die gehuil en geroep en sirenes hoorbaar is. ‘Here, ons het ’n wonderwerk nodig. Asseblief Here, moenie dat hy doodgaan nie. Red sy lewe ... asseblief. Help ons! Here, ek smEEK U!’

Shamika snik steeds, maar sy kry dit reg om te sê: ‘Amen. Jesus, asseblief, amen.’

Die ambulans hou stil en die paramedici kom vinnig, doelgerig nader. Marcus sit terug en kyk hoe hulle Jalen op ’n draagbaar laai. Shamika bly by hom. Sy hardloop langs die manne ambulans toe.

Daardie koeël was vir hom bedoel. Nie vir Jalen nie.

Hy hoor Tyler se stem agter hom. Terselfdertyd kom twee paramedici na hom toe. ‘Marcus, jy is getref. Jy moet ook hospitaal toe gaan.’

Sy been? Hy wil vir hulle sê dat daar niks met hom verkeerd is nie. Hulle moet die een gaan soek wat die skoot afgevuur het. Dit is al wat nou saak maak. Tyler is langs hom. ‘Man, dis ’n lelike wond daai. Jy moet saamgaan.’

‘Die seun ...’ Marcus staar na die plek waar die ambulans met Jalen om die hoek verdwyn het. ‘Bid vir die seun.’

‘Ons sal.’ Tyler gee sy skouer ’n druk. ‘Ek sal Sami en Mary Catherine bring. Ons sal jou by die hospitaal kry.’

Die paramedici tel hom op ’n draagbaar. Marcus kyk terug toe hulle hom na die tweede ambulans toe dra en skielik tref dit hom. Aspyn. Hoe het sy geweet Marcus gaan geskiet word? Sy het hom grond toe gebring, en toe was sy soos blits by Jalen, besig met KPR. Asof sy geweet het dit gaan gebeur. Is sy op ’n manier met die bende verbind? Het sy dalk eerstehandse inligting gehad?

Marcus besluit om die polisie van haar te vertel. Ingeval sy iets weet. Ingeval sy hulle na die skieter toe kan lei. Hy kyk rond. Aspyn het Saterdag ook kom aanbied om te help. Sy is mooi, slank met lang reguit hare en groen oë. Sy is seker weer in die gebou.

Want hy sien haar nêrens nie.

Die paramedici laai Marcus in die ambulans en hy maak sy oë toe. Hoe kon dit gebeur het? Dit was veronderstel om 'n lekker ontspanne aand vir die kinders te wees. Dit was veronderstel om te help met die bende probleem hier in die buurt. Hy dink aan alles wat hulle gedoen het, die geld en tyd wat bestee is, die gebede wat opgegaan het. Dit was alles veronderstel om 'n verskil te maak.

Maar nou is Jalen in die hospitaal, en hang sy lewe aan 'n draadjie.

13



JAG WAS FURIOUS.

He knew Angels Walking were required to stay in control emotionally, but he was seriously struggling. He exhaled and replayed the truth in his mind. Angels on earth could feel human emotions. Anger. Fear. Sorrow—all were possible, especially when angels took on human form. By the power of God, an angel walking on earth had to control himself.

That had never been a problem before. Jag had been on many missions over time. The successful mission he and Aspyn had done during World War II, for instance. They had rescued a pilot shot down over Germany. Destruction, hate, violence.

None of it had moved Jag the way this had.

The futility of kids shooting kids. The same gang violence that had killed Terrance Williams.

Jag steadied his breathing. He waited with Aspyn across the street from the youth center. How could this have happened again? The entire mission was in jeopardy. They had known the shooting was possible. He and Aspyn were both on site, ready to intervene, and Jag had done what he could to delay Dwayne. He had disabled the kid's vehicle. But apparently not well enough. Because the shooting had still happened.

Just like ten years ago.

Either way, right now they didn't have time to wonder about what went wrong. Jag had a job to do.

He wanted Dwayne Davis behind bars. Where he belonged, according to man's law. Where he could do no further harm to mankind.

"Aspyn." He looked straight at her. "You did the right thing. You saved Marcus. I'm the one who failed."

"No." Aspyn's eyes were damp with tears. "You did what you could. Police mean nothing to Dwayne."

Anger stirred in Jag's heart again. "If it were up to me . . ."

"Don't." She touched his shoulder. "We need to stay focused." A tear slid down her cheek and she caught it with the back of her hand. "This feeling . . . the sadness. It's the hardest part of being on mission. So much heartache here on earth."

"Exactly." Jag willed the strength of God to settle his being.

Across the street the teens were still milling about; Officer Kent seemed to have things under control. He was dispersing the young people, telling them to go home.

Jag turned back to Aspyn. "We will ask the Father for a miracle where the child is concerned."

Aspyn nodded. "I didn't see this coming. I thought the boy was out of the way. I thought—"

"It's okay. We don't know all things." This was the hardest part of being an angel. Having more knowledge than humans, more power. But not nearly the knowledge or power of the Father. God alone knew when someone would be called home, when a person's time on earth ran out.

But why allow angels to intervene if people were going to die anyway? Again Jag forced himself to relax. *Stay controlled, Jag*, he told himself. *Keep the mission in mind*. One day the answers would be clear, even to angels. For now they were to do their jobs, carry out their assignments.

"I want to be at the hospital." Aspyn straightened.

"You should go." Jag studied her. She looked stronger than before. She would come back and she would work as hard as possible to see the mission accomplished. Jag had no doubt.

Aspyn looked at him, her eyes still filled with sorrow. "The most important thing is prayer. Always."

"You go. I have another matter to tend to."

"Jag." Her voice held the familiar warning. "Be careful. Work in God's strength. Don't let human emotions guide you."

Her words hit their mark. He clenched his fists and relaxed them again. "I

won't." He exhaled. "The mission is God's. Not ours."

"Exactly." She nodded to him. "See you soon. Stay low."

With that they were both gone. Jag felt the sense of purpose deep inside him. He needed to stay hidden better. Aspyr was right about that, too. Angels Walking had to stay invisible as much as possible. Sure, they had to materialize. That was part of the mission. And when they took on human form, sons and daughters of Adam might wonder. Christians familiar with God's word knew that sometimes they would entertain angels unaware. But too many displays—like not being harmed by flying bullets—and people wouldn't wonder. They would know. God sent His angels to clandestinely work as messengers and protectors among His people. So that He would get the glory. Otherwise humans might worship angels and miss the One who created them.

Almost as soon as he left the spot in front of the youth center, Jag arrived two blocks away, invisible, just down the street from Dwayne and Lexy, who were standing on the sidewalk outside his car. Angels had keen hearing—so Jag could clearly hear Dwayne cursing Lexy, threatening her.

Anger filled Jag again. He wouldn't let the young man hurt the girl. She was important to the mission. He moved closer to Dwayne. Why so much hatred? How could one created in the very image of God be so full of evil? Jag heard a rush of movement in the air around him. A cold wind came with the sound and in a blur the street was filled with demons. Hissing. Laughing. Taunting him and pushing their way closer to Dwayne.

Then suddenly—as if Dwayne could sense the dark support around him—he raised the gun and pointed it straight at Lexy's head.



JAG HAD TO act quickly. He instantly moved to the pay phone near the bar a block away. He slipped into a tight spot between two houses and materialized as the towering blond officer.

Jag stepped up to the pay phone and dialed 911.

The operator answered on the first ring. "What's your emergency?"

"I'm an officer. I know who tried to kill Marcus Dillinger."

"Identify yourself."

"I'll give you the address. I'm in a hurry." He quickly rattled off the information. "Send several squad cars. You don't have long." He hung up and stepped into the shadows, and instantly he was back on the street with Dwayne and Lexy, invisible. The entire phone call had taken mere seconds.

The demons were closing in on Dwayne and Lexy. A team so murderous and dark. Treacherous and evil. The smell of death hung in the air. One of the

demons dug its invisible claws into Dwayne's back.

Jag breathed deep. *I need you, Jesus . . .*

Instantly he was in the midst of the demons. "Go!" He held both hands toward the evil spirits. "Go now!"

One of them hissed and his spiky wings brushed up against Jag. "Fight us, mighty warrior. Our time is short. These two belong to us."

Again Jag felt the rush of anger. This wasn't right. Nothing should stop an angel, not unless . . . What was he thinking? How could he forget?

The name of Jesus.

"In the name of Jesus, be gone!" The humans couldn't hear him, but his voice boomed through another dimension. "Now!"

At the sound of the name of Jesus, the demons withered in size, shrinking back, repulsed, wounded. And instantly the evil band disappeared. They would find someone else to torment tonight.

He stepped out of hiding directly behind Dwayne and Lexy, this time as the police officer again. "Stop." His voice pierced the night air. "Both of you! Police!"

"What the—" Dwayne spun around and pulled his gun.

Jag covered the ground between them in fractions of a second and grabbed the gun from Dwayne.

Jag looked at the pistol in his hand and felt a surge of power. *So this is what it's like?* he thought. He ran his thumb over the handle. He pointed the gun at the teenager. He could kill Dwayne now, but there would be eternal consequences.

It wouldn't take much. The slightest pull on the trigger and Dwayne would no longer be a threat. Jag was breathing harder. He ran his finger along the smooth metal at the center of the gun. *One pull . . . just one.*

Suddenly Lexy cried out, "Jesus, help us!"

Jesus.

At the sound of His name, Jag instantly came to his senses. He felt a heavenly calm wash over him and he moved his finger from the trigger. He would not shoot. Not now. Not ever. The sound of sirens in the distance told him it wouldn't be long. Help was on the way.

"The punishment you're about to receive, you have earned." Jag kept the gun trained on the kid. "But it is nothing to what will come after this life." Jag was within his bounds now. Eternal truths, life-altering messages—these were the job of angels.

Dwayne glared at him. He grabbed Lexy by her hair and held her close.

Before Jag could speak again, three police cars pulled up from different directions and skidded to a stop, their bright lights on Dwayne's car. Six of

them jumped out, guns drawn.

Jag was invisible by then, the gun on the ground where he had been standing. He moved, unnoticed, to a place where the shadows were dark and the lights of the police cars could not reach. And like that he was gone.

Immediately he was at the hospital, in the room where surgeons frantically worked on little Jalen. Aspyr stood nearby, praying. Constantly praying. Jag took his place beside her.

He closed his eyes.

That was close back there. He could still feel the gun in his hand, feel the strange and powerful desire to kill. His anger had nearly consumed him. *I'm sorry, Father. I was wrong.* He would need to be more careful. Another moment like that could jeopardize the entire mission.

Jag closed his eyes. Prayer. That's what he needed. More time in prayer. He could not work successfully as an Angel Walking unless he stayed connected to God. His breathing slowed down and a deep peace came over him. He blinked his eyes open and stared at the injured child lying on the operating table. Yes, he would pray. For the child fighting for his life a few feet away and for himself.

That human rage would never consume him again.

Hoofstuk 13

~

J

ag is woedend.

Hy weet engele wat op aarde is, is veronderstel om hul emosies te beheer, maar hy sukkel. Hy sukkel regtig. Hy blaas sy asem uit en deurdink die hele saak. Engele op aarde ervaar menslike emosies. Woede. Vrees. Hartseer. Alles is moontlik, veral wanneer die engele menslike vorm aanneem. Maar 'n engel wat op aarde is, moet in die krag van die Here selfbeheersing toepas.

Dit was nog nooit voorheen 'n probleem nie. Jag was al op baie sendings. Soos die suksesvolle een in die Tweede Wêreldoorlog saam met Aspyr. Hulle het 'n vlieënier wat bokant Duitsland afgeskiet is, gered. En vernietiging, haat, geweld beleef.

Niks daarvan het so 'n invloed op Jag gehad soos hierdie besigheid nie.

Die sinneloosheid van kinders wat kinders skiet. Dieselfde bendegegeweld wat ook die oorsaak was van Terrance Williams se dood.

Jag haal diep asem. Hy en Aspyn staan oorkant die jeugsentrum. Hoe kon dit weer gebeur het? Hul hele sending is op 'n mespunt. Hulle het geweet daar is 'n moontlikheid van 'n skietery. Hy en Aspyn was al twee op hul plek, gereed om in te gryp, en Jag het gedoen wat hy kon om Dwayne te vertraag. Hy het sy voertuig onklaar gemaak. Maar skynbaar nie goed genoeg nie. Want die skietery het plaasgevind.

Net soos tien jaar gelede.

Hoe dit ook al sy, op die oomblik het hulle nie tyd om te wonder wat verkeerd gegaan het nie. Daar is iets anders wat Jag eers moet doen.

Hy wil Dwayne Davis agter tralies sien. Waar hy behoort, volgens die mense se wette. Waar hy nie verder skade kan aanrig nie.

'Aspyn.' Hy kyk haar reguit aan. 'Jy het die regte ding gedoen. Jy het Marcus gered. Ek is die een wat gefaal het.'

'Nee.' Aspyn se oë is nat van die tranes. 'Jy het gedoen wat jy kon. Die polisie skrik Dwayne nie af nie.'

Die woede stoot weer op in Jag. 'As dit van my afgehang het ...'

'Moenie.' Sy raak aan sy skouer. 'Ons moet gefokus bly.'

'n Traan rol by haar wang af en sy vee dit met die agterkant van haar hand weg. 'Hierdie gevoel ... hartseer. Dit is die moeilikste deel van die sending. Daar is so baie hartseer op aarde.'

'Presies.' Jag bid dat God se krag die kalmte in sy wese sal herstel.

Oorkant die straat maal die tieners nog rond, maar dit lyk asof offisier Kent alles onder beheer het. Hy is besig om almal huis toe te stuur.

Jag draai na Aspyn. 'Ons sal die Vader vra om 'n wonderwerk vir die kind te doen.'

Aspyn knik. 'Ek het dit glad nie sien kom nie. Ek het gedink die seun is uit die pad. Ek het gedink ...'

'Dis alles reg, Aspyn. Ons weet nie alles nie.' Dit is die moeilikste deel. Hulle het weliswaar meer kennis en krag as mense, maar natuurlik nie naastenby die kennis of krag van die Vader nie. God alleen weet wanneer dit tyd is vir iemand om huis toe te gaan, wanneer 'n mens se tyd op aarde uitgeloop het.

Maar waarom laat Hy engele toe om in te gryp as mense in elk geval gaan sterf? Jag dwing homself weer om te ontspan. *Behou jou selfbeheersing, Jag, dink hy. Hou die sending voor oë.* Eendag sal hulle – mense sowel as engele – al die antwoorde ken. Maar vir eers moet hulle hul werk doen, hul opdragte uitvoer.

'Ek wil by die hospitaal wees.' Aspyn strek haar skouers

'Ja, jy moet gaan.' Jag kyk na haar. Sy lyk sterker as ooit. Sy sal terugkom en so hard werk as wat sy kan om hul taak te voltooi. Daaraan twyfel Jag nie.

Aspyn kyk na hom, haar oë steeds hartseer. 'Die belangrikste ding is gebed.

Altyd.'

'Gaan eers. Ek het ander dinge om te doen.'

'Jag.' Haar stem hou die bekende waarskuwing in. 'Wees versigtig. Werk in die krag van God. Moenie toelaat dat menslike emosies die oorhand kry nie.'

Haar woorde tref hom hard. Hy bal sy vuiste en maak hulle dan doelbewus oop. 'Ek sal nie.' Hy blaas sy asem uit. 'Dit is God se sending. Nie ons s'n nie.'

'Presies.' Sy knik vir hom. 'Tot weersiens. Hou jouself verskuil.'

En daarmee is al twee weg. Jag se doelgerigtheid is terug. Hy moet buite sig bly. Aspy n is daaroor ook reg. Engele op 'n missie behoort so veel as moontlik onsigbaar te bly. Natuurlik moet hulle soms in menslike gedaante verskyn. Dit is deel van die werk. En wanneer dit gebeur, kan mense soms wonder. Christene wat God se Woord ken, weet dat hulle soms onwetend engele ontvang. Maar te veel vertoon – soos om koeëls te vang – sal maak dat mense nie meer wonder nie, maar weet. God stuur sy engele om in die geheim as boodskappers en beskermers onder die mense te werk. Sodat Hy al die eer kry. Anders sal die mense die engele begin aanbid en die Een wat hulle gemaak het, miskyk.

Jag kom feitlik onmiddellik na sy verdwyning twee blokke verder by Dwayne en Lexy aan. Hulle staan op die sypaadjie langs sy motor. Engele kan goed hoor, en Jag hoor duidelik hoe Dwayne Lexy vloek en dreig.

Hy is onmiddellik weer kwaad. Hy sal nie toelaat dat die jong man die meisie seermaak nie. Sy is belangrik vir die sending. Hy beweeg nader aan Dwayne. Waarom soveel haat? Hoe kan iemand wat na die beeld van God geskape is, so vol boosheid wees? Jag hoor beweging in die lug om hom. Koue lug beweeg saam met die geluid nader en skielik is die lug vol demone. Wat sis. En lag. Hom tart, en al nader aan Dwayne beweeg.

Skielik – asof Dwayne die ondersteuning van die duisternis kan aanvoel – lig hy sy pistool en rig dit op Lexy.

~

Jag moet vinnig werk. Hy beweeg na die telefoonhokkie by die kroeg 'n blok verder weg. Hy glip by 'n nou ruimte tussen twee huise in en verskyn feitlik onmiddellik as die groot blonde polisieman.

Jag gaan na die telefoon en bel die polisie se nooddiens.

Dit word onmiddellik beantwoord. 'Wat is jou probleem?'

'Ek is 'n polisie-offisier. Ek weet wie Marcus Dillinger wou doodmaak.'

'Identifiseer jouself.'

'Ek sal jou die adres gee. Ek is haastig.' Hy gee die inligting blitsvinnig.

'Stuur verskeie patrolliemotors. Julle het nie baie tyd nie.' Hy sit die telefoon

neer, verdwyn in die donkerte, en is feitlik onmiddellik terug op die straat by Dwayne en Lexy, nou weer onsigbaar. Die telefoonoproep het slegs sekondes geduur.

Die demone is besig om op Dwayne en Lexy toe te sak. 'n Moorddadige, donker groep, verraderlik en boos. Die reuk van die dood hang in die lug. Een van die demone grawe met onsigbare kloue in Dwayne se rug.

Jag haal diep asem. Ek het U nodig, Here Jesus ...

En toe is hy tussen die demone. 'Gaan weg!' Hy hou sy hande na die beseeste toe uit. 'Gaan weg van hierdie plek, nou!'

Een van hulle sis en vlieg teen Jag vas. 'Ja, kom baklei teen ons, magtige vegter! Ons het nie baie tyd nie. Hierdie twee is ons s'n.'

Die woede stoot weer in Jag op. Iets is nie reg nie. Niks kan 'n engel stuit nie, tensy ... wat makeer hom? Hoe kon hy vergeet?

Die Naam van Jesus.

'In die Naam van Jesus, gaan weg!' Die mense kan hom nie hoor nie, maar sy stem daver deur 'n ander dimensie. 'Onmiddellik!'

Toe hulle die Naam van Jesus hoor, krimp die demone ineen, verwond, oorwonne. Die beseeste groep is weg. Hulle sal vanaand iemand anders moet soek om te treiter.

Jag verskyn agter Dwayne en Lexy, weer as die polisieman. 'Stop!' Sy stem klief deur die naglug. 'Al twee van julle. Polisie!'

'Wat de ... ' Dwayne draai vinnig om en lig sy pistool.

In 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde is Jag by hulle en gryp die wapen by Dwayne.

Jag kyk na die wapen in sy hand en voel 'n opswelling van krag. *So dit is hoe dit voel?* dink hy. Hy vee met sy duim oor die handvatsel. Dan rig hy die wapen op die tiener. Hy kan Dwayne doodskiet, maar daar sal ewige gevolge wees.

Dit sal so maklik wees. Die geringste drukking op die sneller en Dwayne is nie meer 'n bedreiging nie. Jag se asem is gejaagd. Hy vryf weer met sy vinger oor die gladde metaal van die wapen. *Een skoot ... net een.*

Skielik roep Lexy uit: 'Jesus, help ons!'

Jesus.

By die aanhoor van die Naam kom Jag tot sy sinne. Hy voel hoe 'n hemelse kalmte oor hom kom en hy haal sy vinger van die sneller af. Hy sal nie skiet nie. Nie nou nie. Nooit nie. Die geluid van sirenes in die verte sê vir hom dit sal nie meer lank wees nie; hulp is op pad.

'Jy verdien die straf wat jy binnekort gaan kry.' Jag hou die wapen op die kind gerig. 'Maar dit is niks teen wat in die hiernamaals gaan gebeur nie.' Jag is nou binne sy grense. Ewige waarhede, lewensveranderende boodskappe – dit is engele se werk.

Dwayne gluur hom net aan. Hy gryp Lexy aan haar hare en hou haar styf teen hom.

Voordat Jag weer iets kan sê, kom drie polisiemotors uit drie verskillende rigtings aan. Hulle hou stil, hul ligte op Dwayne se motor gerig. Ses van hulle spring uit, wapens in die hand.

Jag is nou weer onsigbaar, die wapen op die grond waar hy gestaan het. Hy beweeg, onsigbaar, na 'n donker plek waar die polisiemotors se ligte hom nie kan bereik nie. En dan is hy weg.

Hy is dadelik in die hospitaal, in die kamer waar die dokters besig is met klein Jalen. Aspyen staan daar naby, besig om te bid, soos sy gesê het. Jag gaan staan langs haar.

Hy maak sy oë toe.

Dit was amper. Hy voel nog steeds die wapen in sy hand, voel die vreemde, sterk drang om dood te maak. Sy woede het hom byna verteer. *Vergewe my, Vader. Ek was verkeerd.* Hy moet versigtiger wees. As so iets weer gebeur, stel hy die hele missie in gevaar.

Jag maak sy oë toe. Gebed. Dis wat hy nodig het. Meer tyd in gebed. Hy kan nie suksesvol as 'n engel op 'n missie werk as hy nie verbind bly aan God nie. Sy asemhaling keer terug na normaal en 'n diepe vrede daal oor hom neer. Hy maak sy oë oop en staar na die beseerde kind op die operasietafel. Ja, hy sal bid. Vir die kind wat 'n paar tree daarvandaan om sy lewe veg, en ook vir homself.

Dat menslike woede nie weer die oorhand oor hom sal kry nie.



ON THE WAY TO Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Mary Catherine sat in the back and prayed. Tyler was behind the wheel, Sami in the passenger seat beside him. The car stayed quiet except for the occasional sound of a whispered prayer. Mary Catherine stared out the window. How could this have happened?

Of course the youth center was in a dangerous part of town. But none of them ever really thought the gangs would shoot at them. Why would they? Marcus was only trying to help.

They turned into the parking lot and found a spot near the emergency room entrance. The ambulances were still there, parked close to the doors. Mary Catherine squeezed her eyes shut. *Dear God, be with that child. Please.*

Tyler hurried out of the car and around to Sami's door and then Mary Catherine's.

"Is the bullet still in Marcus's leg?" Mary Catherine hadn't wanted to ask until now. She had seen the blood on his jeans before the paramedics took him.

"I couldn't tell." Tyler looked pale, worried. "I hope not."

Inside they checked in at the front desk and explained they were there for Marcus.

"Come on back. He already has visitors, but we're slow tonight." The nurse opened a set of double doors and met them on the other side. "Can't believe those gangs. Trying to kill Marcus Dillinger? Guy only wanted to do something good for the city."

Mary Catherine trailed after the group. Where was the little boy? Where was Jalen? Was he in one of the rooms with the curtains drawn?

Her heart ached at the thought. Precious little child. He had only wanted to help bring in the pizza. She fought back tears as they walked. They reached Marcus's room and stepped in.

The Wayne family was already there, including Shelly. She was sitting next to Marcus's bed, running her hand along his arm.

"Hey." He seemed to shake off Shelly's touch. He looked at Tyler and Sami and then held Mary Catherine's gaze. The fear in his eyes was tangible.

“Any word on Jalen?”

“We came here first.” Tyler reached out and clasped Marcus’s hand.

“I’m fine.” His mouth sounded dry. “I need to know about that boy. The nurse won’t tell me.”

Shelly slid her chair closer to his bed and ran her hand over his hair. “I’m sure he’s okay.”

“He’s not okay.” Marcus shot her a harsh look.

Shelly’s sad smile didn’t waver. She moved her hand to his shoulder. Meanwhile Coach Wayne and his wife were talking quietly, whispering a few feet away.

Mary Catherine felt out of place. The cold, shrinking feeling deep inside her could only be jealousy. Which she hated. She focused her attention on Marcus’s injured leg.

He lay stretched out on the bed, one leg of his jeans cut off. The bandage was halfway up his thigh and, if the wrap was any indication, the wound was serious. He had an IV in his arm, and he looked tired.

Sami looked at Marcus’s leg. “Did they get the bullet out?”

“It didn’t go in. Just grazed me.”

“Poor baby.” Shelly was on her feet, hanging over the side of the bed like she wanted to crawl up next to Marcus.

Mary Catherine had seen enough. “I’m going to go find Jalen’s mother. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

She didn’t wait for a response. Out in the hall she found the nurses’ station and asked how to get to the pediatric ICU. “Take the elevator to the fourth floor.” The woman hesitated. “Other than parents, patients are only allowed one visitor at a time.”

“Thank you.” Mary Catherine was already on her way to the elevator. At the fourth floor she walked quietly to the nurses’ station, but before she could ask, she saw Jalen’s mother in the hallway outside one of the rooms. She was sitting on a chair, her head in her hands.

Mary Catherine approached and took the seat beside her. “Shamika. It’s Mary Catherine. From the youth center.” She put her arm around Shamika’s shoulders. “How is he?”

The woman lifted her head. Her eyes, which had shone with hope earlier today, were swollen from crying and dark with fear and defeat. “How did this happen?”

She wasn’t looking for answers, so Mary Catherine let the moment pass. “Is he in surgery?”

“Yes.” She sniffed and brushed the backs of her hands beneath her eyes. “They have to remove part of his skull. Because his brain was swelling.” She

shook her head, bewildered. “They have to get the bullet out. It went from his head into his neck.”

Mary Catherine didn’t want to ask any more questions. Especially when Shamika probably didn’t have answers. Like whether the boy would walk again or how much damage had been done to his brain or his spine . . . or if the doctors even expected him to live.

All of it was one minute at a time. Mary Catherine took her arm from Shamika’s shoulders and reached for the woman’s hands. “Can I pray with you?”

“Would it matter?” She probably wasn’t trying to be rude or difficult. Her question didn’t sound cynical. “I mean it. God could’ve protected my boy from that bullet. Why pray now?”

Mary Catherine had spent a great deal of time on this issue. She had done a summer of Bible study on the power of prayer and the reasons bad things happen in the first place. She kept her tone even. “I’m not sure anyone knows exactly why certain things happen, but I know this. Evil doesn’t come from God.”

Shamika thought about that for several seconds. Gradually she nodded her head. “I suppose.” She stared at her hands. “But really . . . why did this happen?” Fresh tears began to fall down her cheeks. “He was just being good.”

For a long moment Mary Catherine said nothing.

“I’m serious.” Shamika’s voice was sharper this time. “If you can tell me, then tell me.”

Mary Catherine hadn’t planned on saying anything. She had no real answers. She took a deep breath. “The Bible says this place, this earth . . . it’s broken and fallen. God gives us a way out through Jesus. Even still, every one of us will die someday.” She paused. “This isn’t our home, Shamika.”

She ran her right thumb over her empty left ring finger. “Jalen’s daddy left me when I was six weeks pregnant. I figured if he couldn’t love me, no one could. Not even God.”

Mary Catherine put her hand alongside Shamika’s face. “That’s not true. God loves you so much. He has a plan for you and Jalen and whatever that plan is, it’s good. Even now.”

Confusion lined Shamika’s face. “There’s nothing good about this.”

“No.” Mary Catherine felt frustrated with herself. She wasn’t helping at all. “Of course not.”

“So what does it mean?” Shamika’s eyes filled with tears again. “God loves us. He has plans for us. But here we are, sitting in this hospital while Jalen fights for every breath.”

There were no simple answers. “I only know that God is great. If we choose Him, then one day we’ll have eternity together. No more tears, no sorrow, no pain. No shooting or gang violence. No lonely nights. Never again.”

Her tears came harder. “I just want my baby back. I want him to live and laugh and be . . . like he was three hours ago.”

Mary Catherine took hold of Shamika’s hands once more. “Then let’s pray. Let’s ask God for that.”

“Okay.” Shamika looked like a little girl, desperate and lost. She took tight hold of Mary Catherine’s fingers. “Please . . . go ahead.”

Mary Catherine nodded. “Dear God . . .” Tears flooded her eyes and fell onto her lap. The little boy had been so happy, so trusting that all of life would stay the way it had been in that moment. Filled with love and joy and fun. She tried to find the words. “Lord, we don’t understand evil or why things like this happen. But we need Your help to get through it.” She struggled to keep her voice steady. “Father, we ask You for a miracle for Jalen. That he would live and laugh and that he would one day soon be just like he was a few hours ago. We ask this in Jesus’ powerful name, amen.”

When she finished praying she hugged Shamika. “Let me give you my number. So you can update me on how he’s doing.”

They exchanged information and Shamika was just starting to explain how Jalen’s birthday was coming up in a few weeks when the doctor opened the door at the end of the hallway and walked toward them.

His face was taut, his expression deeply concerned. “We’ve done what we can. We removed the bullet. He’s resting now.”

Shamika stood. “Is he . . . breathing on his own?”

“No.” The doctor looked troubled. “He’s on life support.” He paused. “I have to be honest, Mrs. Johnson, Jalen may not make it through the night. He’s a fighter, but the damage . . . it’s considerable.”

Quiet sobs came over Shamika. Mary Catherine stood next to her and turned her eyes to the doctor. “Will you bring him back here?”

“Yes. In a few minutes.” He put his hand on Shamika’s arm. “He’s unconscious. Once he’s back in his room, you can talk to him. He may be able to hear you.”

Mary Catherine helped Shamika into the room and again her tears came. The woman covered her face with her hands, stifling her sobs. “Not my boy, God . . . please . . . bring him back to me. I can’t do this.”

Shamika didn’t seem to be able to move at all. Not toward the room or toward Mary Catherine. Not at all. Mary Catherine prayed silently. *God, give her peace and strength. Help her be strong for her little boy. Show us You’re*

here. Please.

Gradually Mary Catherine felt the woman beside her start to relax. After a while the doctor brought Jalen back to the room. He looked so small, lost in the sheets and bandages, tubes and wires. Mary Catherine stayed by Shamika as she took up her place beside her son.

"I'm scared," Shamika whispered. She lowered her hands from her face. Jalen's head was fully wrapped and he had a breathing tube in his throat and mouth.

Shamika put her hand on Jalen's much smaller one. "Baby, it's Mama." She hung her head and grabbed a few quick breaths, clearly fighting for control. When she lifted her head, she studied her boy and then brushed her knuckles softly against his cheeks. "Mama's here. Jesus too, baby. It's gonna be okay." She wiped her tears with her free hand. "You keep fighting, Jalen. You're gonna be stronger for this." She looked back at Mary Catherine and the smallest flicker of hope flashed in her eyes. Then she turned back to Jalen. "We'll both be stronger."

The door to the room opened and an older nurse poked her head in. "Mary Catherine?"

"Yes?" She turned to the woman.

"Your friends are out here. They want to talk to you."

Mary Catherine hugged Shamika again. "Want me to stay? I will. I can call in to work tomorrow."

"That's okay. I wanna be alone with my baby."

"I understand." Mary Catherine searched Shamika's face. "Call me or text me if you need anything. We'll get everyone to pray for Jalen, all right?"

"Yes." She managed the slightest smile. "Thank you."

"You're not alone."

Shamika nodded and turned to Jalen again. "I'll be here. Until he opens his eyes and talks to me again."

That was all they could ask for. That Shamika might believe enough to expect the impossible. To look for a miracle.

Mary Catherine stepped out of the room. Tyler and Sami were waiting for her. Sami hugged her first. "How is he?"

"Fighting." She blinked back a wave of tears. "The doctor said it doesn't look good." She pulled a tissue from her purse and pressed it to her eyes. "We have to pray for a miracle. We need to believe."

"Poor little guy." Tyler put his arm around Sami.

Sami sighed. "We all prayed in Marcus's room."

Mary Catherine didn't want to think about Marcus. "Is he staying overnight?" Spending time with Shamika had been good for her. She hadn't

once pictured Shelly sitting next to Marcus earlier, or the way the scene had jabbed at her heart.

“No.” Tyler stepped up. “Shelly and the Waynes are gone. I guess the doctors are finishing up paperwork. We can take him home.” Together the four of them had only Tyler’s car. “We could come back and get you later.”

“I’ll be ready in a few minutes. I can meet you downstairs.” She took Sami’s hand. “Is that okay?”

“Of course.” Sami looked beat, too. They all did. She and Tyler hugged Mary Catherine again. Longer this time. Then they left for the elevator.

Mary Catherine had spotted a small chapel just down the hall. She didn’t want to interrupt Shamika’s time with her son, and she hardly wanted to be with Marcus after seeing him with Shelly earlier. Not tonight. Not when she couldn’t get a grip on her emotions.

She waited until Tyler and Sami were gone, then she headed toward the chapel. It was right across from the elevators. She went inside and found it empty.

The room was small and dimly lit. Just eight pews and a wooden cross at the front. Mary Catherine sat in one of the middle pews, dropped to her knees, and brought her hands to her face. She prayed for Jalen and for his mother and for the future of the youth center. She prayed the shooter would be caught and that progress would someday be made on the streets of inner-city Los Angeles.

Not until she had talked to God about all that did she pray for the thing that was weighing most heavily on her heart. Her words came in quiet whispers. “I let myself start to fall for Marcus, Lord . . . and that was a mistake. I’m sorry. That’s not the life You want for me. You’ve made that clear. So protect my fragile heart, God. Please. When I see Marcus let me see him as a brother. Only that. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

She lifted her head and gasped.

Sitting across the narrow aisle from her was a police officer. Big and blond, his hat in his hands. He looked at her and nodded politely. “Sorry to startle you. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Is something . . . did Jalen . . . ?”

“No. The boy is still with us. Your prayers matter, Mary Catherine. Keep praying.”

“I will.” She sniffed and squinted at him, trying to make out the name on his badge. “Have I met you? At the center?”

“No.” He put his hat back on his head. “I’m Officer Jag. I’m not from around here, but I was there when the shooting happened. I wanted to update you.”

Mary Catherine felt her heart beat faster. “Did they catch him? The shooter?”

“They did. Dwayne Davis is behind bars, which is where he’ll stay. But the girl . . . she’s very young. She still has a chance.”

“What girl?” Mary Catherine turned in the pew so she could see the man better. He had the most unusual eyes. Like a hundred colors in one. And a peace seemed to emanate from him. Maybe because of his uniform. She wasn’t sure.

“The girl is Lexy Jones. Dwayne’s girlfriend. She’s been heading down a dark path.” The officer clearly had more to say. He glanced at the back door of the chapel as if he were in a hurry. “Anyway, Marcus asked about the Scared Straight program.”

That was true. Mary Catherine knew about that. “He was told it didn’t work that well.”

“We have another program now. It’s newer. More involved. It’s called Last Time In. Kids get a tour of the jail, the inmates tell them the truth about being incarcerated. Then they get four weeks of counseling—three times a week. It’s intense, but it can work.”

Mary Catherine nodded. She liked the idea. “Did you tell Marcus?”

“I can’t stay. I’m hoping you might tell him.”

“Okay.” Mary Catherine had just asked God for a break from Marcus. Now this. “Is the program available here?”

“It’s in place, but they need a grant to continue. Ten thousand dollars.” Officer Jag stood and moved out of the pew into the aisle. He held his hand out to Mary Catherine. “If you could tell Marcus, I’d appreciate it.”

“I will.” Mary Catherine stood and shook the man’s hand. As she did, the connection worked its way instantly to her soul. Like there was power in his touch. Their eyes met and held and Mary Catherine had the strangest feeling. Like she was on holy ground.

“About your prayers. Just remember . . . God knows better than we do. He always does. Even when it doesn’t make sense.” He looked to the door again. “Keep praying.”

His bright eyes held hers and then he left.

Questions pelted Mary Catherine’s soul. How had the officer known she was here? And how did he know she was a friend of Marcus’s? How did he know her name? She had no answers. The nurse at the desk must’ve seen her come this way and told him. And maybe the nurses also knew who she had come with and that they were here with Marcus.

What other explanation was there?

Mainly the officer wanted her to tell Marcus about the Last Time In

program. The idea sounded amazing. Certainly kids like Lexy Jones weren't going to stay away from gangs and violence just because a youth center opened in their neighborhood. They needed something more.

If the program needed money, Mary Catherine could fund it. She had an account her parents had set up. Money they put aside for her every year as a birthday gift. She didn't need it, so she hadn't touched it. When the time came to use it, she could only justify using it to help someone else.

This would be a perfect reason.

Now she had to tell Marcus. She didn't want to talk to him today. In light of Jalen's life-threatening injuries and the terrifying shooting, the news could wait. At least until tomorrow.

But who was Marcus supposed to talk to about the program? Officer Jag said he wasn't from around here, so then who was the contact? Mary Catherine hurried out of the chapel and stared down the hallway. The man had been gone for less than a minute.

So where was he?

She walked as quickly as she could to the nurses' station. The woman sitting behind the desk was the same one who had been there before. "Hi . . . Officer Jag came into the chapel to talk to me. Can you tell me where he went?"

The woman blinked. "Officer Jag?"

"Yes. He's tall, blond hair. Light eyes." She could see the woman wasn't tracking with her. "He must've come by here."

"There hasn't been an officer on this floor. Not for an hour at least."

Frustration rattled Mary Catherine's nerves. "He was just here." She pointed down the hall toward the chapel. "He left from right there."

"I'm sorry, miss." The woman looked indignant. "I told you. I haven't seen an officer. Certainly no one by that description." She paused. "What did you say his name was?"

"Officer Jag." She realized that she hadn't gotten a full name. "He said he wasn't from around . . ." Mary Catherine felt her shoulders sink. "Never mind."

She jogged down the hallway toward the chapel and kept going to where it dead-ended. There was no way out. The only direction the officer could've left was right past the nurses' station. Mary Catherine headed that way. This time the woman at the nurses' station was buried in paperwork.

That had to be it. The nurse had been too busy to notice the man.

A sigh made its way through Mary Catherine and she walked to the elevator. Her friends would be ready to go. On her way to the emergency room, Mary Catherine remembered Officer Jag's words about prayer. *God*

knows better than we do. He always does. Even when it doesn't make sense.

That was what the man had said, right? Clearly, he had to have been talking about Jalen. The little boy needed everyone praying, everyone believing. Good that the officer was a man of faith.

The city needed more like him, wherever he was from.

She reached Marcus's room. He was sitting up now, getting instructions and paperwork from a nurse. Tyler and Sami were waiting near the door.

Marcus looked at her. "How is he?"

"Not good." She stayed by the door with her friends. "He needs a miracle."

The ride home was quiet. Marcus sat in the front with Tyler, and the two of them did most of the talking. "Police came in when you guys were gone." Marcus leaned his head against the seat. He looked exhausted. "They have the shooter in custody. His girlfriend, too."

"Good." Tyler didn't hesitate. "Makes me think they should arrest everyone in both gangs. Run their rap sheets. Figure out what new crimes they're linked to." He glanced at Marcus, his hand tight on the steering wheel. "Maybe then the younger guys wouldn't be so quick to join."

Mary Catherine stayed silent in the backseat. She looked out the window and thought about Shamika, spending the night at her son's side. The conversation in the car faded and Mary Catherine lifted her eyes to the stars overhead.

God could do this, of course. He could give them a miracle for Jalen.

Now she could only pray that He would.



JAG STOOD NEXT to Aspyn on the opposite side of the child's bed, invisible. Aspyn was ready to fight—just like Jag. She wanted to see the mission succeed and she wanted justice.

"Earth is so difficult . . . full of pain." She held her hand over the boy's head. "Jesus, heal him. Let him live."

Jag loved the heart of his teammate. She was a very great example to him, especially after tonight. "My anger . . . I nearly lost it."

She turned and stared at him. "Dwayne Davis?"

"Yes." Jag still felt ashamed. The feel of the trigger beneath his finger would stay with him always. "I could've killed that boy. I wanted to."

No matter what, they had to be honest with each other. Aspyn faced him. "Why didn't you?"

"I'm an angel. I want to do God's will. The name of Jesus reminded me."

Aspyn exhaled, relieved. "Who said it?"

"Lexy. The girl." He straightened himself, empowered, convinced that his

perfect God was with him even in his imperfection. “God used her to get my attention. Just in time.”

“She needs help.” Aspyn’s tone was heavy. She looked at Jalen again. “So many pieces of this mission. We can’t miss a moment.”

That had never been more true. “I spoke to Mary Catherine in the chapel.”

“Do you think she has an idea? Who you are?”

“No.” He felt another reason for regret. “I wasn’t as careful with Dwayne. The guys on the streets think I’m some monster cop. I need to be careful.” He looked deep into her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’ve talked to the Father about it.”

“Then you are forgiven.” Aspyn took hold of his hand for a moment. “Let this go.” She moved closer to the bed and studied the child. “The hardest thing about earth is that love is not enough. It’s never enough.”

Jag let her words settle in his soul. He shook his head. “Love is always enough, Aspyn. But there are different kinds of love.”

“True.” She checked the monitors surrounding the boy. “The child is fading. We need to pray.”

And so for the rest of the evening they begged God for a miracle, asking that He intervene in Jalen’s body and that He give doctors wisdom beyond their abilities. Most of all they asked that Jalen be surrounded by love. Not the earthly sort of love that could so easily fail.

But heaven’s love.

A love that would always be enough.

Hoofstuk 14

~

O

p pad na die Cedars-Sinai-hospitaal sit Mary Catherine agter in die motor en Sami op die sitplek langs Tyler, wat bestuur. Dit is stil in die motor, behalwe vir ’n gefluisterde gebed nou en dan. Mary Catherine staar by die venster uit. Hoe kon dit gebeur het? Die jeugsentrum is wel in ’n gevaarlike deel van die stad, maar tog ...

Niemand het gedink die bendeledede gaan regtig op hulle skiet nie. Waarom sou hulle? Marcus wou net help.

Hulle draai by die parkeerarea van die hospitaal in en kry ’n oop plek naby die ingang van die nooddiens-afdeling. Die ambulans is nog daar, naby die deur. Mary Catherine maak haar oë toe. *Liewe Here, wees tog met die kind.*

Asseblief.

Tyler klim haastig uit en gaan maak Sami en Mary Catherine se deure oop.

‘Is die koeël nog in Marcus se been?’ Mary Catherine wou nie voorheen vra nie. Sy het die bloed op sy jeans gesien toe die paramedici hom wegneem.

‘Ek weet nie.’ Tyler is bleek. Hy lyk bekommerd. ‘Ek hoop nie so nie.’

By ontvangs verduidelik hulle dat hulle vir Marcus wil sien.

‘Kom gerus in. Daar is reeds ander besoekers by hom, maar dit is stil vanaand.’ Die ontvangsdame maak die dubbeldeur oop en ontmoet hulle aan die ander kant. ‘Mens kan nie glo wat die bendes alles doen nie. Het hulle sowaar probeer om Marcus Dillinger dood te maak? Hy wou dan net goed doen.’

Mary Catherine loop ’n entjie agter die groep. Waar is die klein seuntjie? Jalen? Is hy in een van die kamers waar die gordyne om die beddens getrek is?

Haar hart is seer by die gedagte. Die dierbare seuntjie. Hy wou net help om die pizza te gaan haal. Sy veg nog teen die tranes toe hulle by Marcus se kamer kom en ingaan.

Die Waynes is reeds daar, ook Shelly. Sy sit langs Marcus se bed en vryf sy arm.

‘Haai.’ Dis asof hy van Shelly se aanraking ontslae wil raak. Hy kyk na Tyler en Sami en toe kyk hy lank in Mary Catherine se oë. Die vrees in sy oë is tasbaar. ‘Het julle nuus van Jalen?’

‘Ons het eerste hierheen gekom.’ Tyler steek sy hand uit en gryp Marcus se hand.

‘Ek is oukei.’ Sy mond klink droog. ‘Ek moet weet van die seuntjie. Die verpleegster wil niks vir ons sê nie.’

Shelly stoot haar stoel nader na sy bed toe en vryf oor sy hare. ‘Ek is seker hy is oukei.’

‘Hy is nie oukei nie.’ Marcus gee haar ’n kwaai kyk.

Shelly se hartseer glimlag bly op sy plek. Sy verskuif haar hand na sy skouer. Ollie en sy vrou praat saggies met mekaar.

Mary Catherine voel ongemaklik. Die koue gevoel in haar binneste kan net jaloesie wees. Sy pes dit. Sy fokus haar aandag op Marcus se beseerde been.

Hy lê uitgestrek op die bed, een pyp van sy jeans afgesny. Daar is ’n verband om sy bobeen, en as die dikte daarvan ’n aanduiding is, moet dit ’n ernstige wond wees. Daar is ’n drup in sy arm, en hy lyk moeg.

Sami kyk na Marcus se been. ‘Het hulle die koeël uitgehaal?’

‘Dit het nie ingegaan nie. Dit het my net skrams getref.’

‘Arme ding.’ Shelly staan nou regop en hang oor sy bed asof sy langs hom wil inkruip.

Mary Catherine het genoeg gesien. ‘Ek gaan kyk of ek Jalen se ma kan kry. Ek sal kom sê as ek iets uitgevind het.’

Sy wag nie op ’n antwoord nie. In die gang gaan sy na die verpleegsters se diensstasie en vra hoe om by die kinders se hoësonneheid uit te kom. ‘Vierde verdieping – jy kan die hysbak neem,’ sê die verpleegster. ‘Maar hulle laat net een besoeker op ’n keer toe.’

‘Dankie.’ Mary Catherine is reeds op pad. Op die vierde verdieping gaan sy dadelik na die verpleegsters se diensstasie, maar voordat sy daar kom, sien sy Jalen se ma in die gang voor een van die kamers. Sy sit op ’n stoel, haar kop in haar hande.

Mary Catherine gaan sit langs haar. ‘Shamika. Ek is Mary Catherine. Van die jeugsentrum.’ Sy sit haar arm om Shamika se skouers. ‘Hoe gaan dit met hom?’

Die vrou lig haar kop op. Haar gesig is geswel van al die huil en haar oë, wat vroeër so hoopvol geblink het, is nou donker van vrees en verslaenheid. ‘Hoe het dit gebeur?’

Sy verwag nie ’n antwoord nie, en Mary Catherine laat dit verbygaan. ‘Is hy nog in die teater?’

‘Ja.’ Sy snuif en vee met haar hande oor haar oë. ‘Hulle moet ’n deel van sy skedel verwyder. Daar is ’n swelsel op sy brein.’ Sy skud haar kop, verward. ‘Hulle moet die koeël uitkry. Dit het van sy kop af in sy nek af gegaan.’

Mary Catherine vra nie verder vrae nie. Sy weet Shamika het waarskynlik nie antwoorde nie. Antwoorde op vrae soos: Sal die seun ooit weer kan loop? Hoeveel skade is aan die brein of ruggraat aangerig? Dink die dokters hoegenaamd hy sal lewe?

Alles kan van een oomblik tot die volgende verander. Mary Catherine haal haar arm van Shamika se skouers af en neem haar hande. ‘Kan ek saam met jou bid?’

‘Wat help dit tog?’ Sy probeer waarskynlik nie moeilik wees nie. Sy klink nie sinies nie. ‘Ek is ernstig. God kon mos my seun teen die koeël beskerm het. Is dit nie nou te laat om te bid nie?’

Mary Catherine het al baie oor hierdie saak nagedink. Sy het een somer Bybelstudie gedoen oor die krag van gebed en die rede waarom slegte dinge met mense gebeur. Sy hou haar stem gelykmatig. ‘Ek is nie seker enige iemand weet waarom sekere dinge gebeur nie, maar ek weet een ding: Die kwade kom nie van God af nie.’

Shamika dink na oor hierdie gedagte. Eindelik knik sy. ‘Ja, seker.’ Sy staar na haar hande. ‘Maar tog ... waarom het dit gebeur?’ Nuwe tranes begin by haar wange afrol. ‘Hy wou net goed doen.’

Mary Catherine bly ’n lang ruk stil.

‘Ek is ernstig.’ Shamika se stem is skerper. ‘As jy weet, sê my.’

Mary Catherine wou nie iets sê nie. Sy het nie regtig die antwoorde nie. Sy haal diep asem. ‘Die Bybel sê die Aarde ... dis gebroke en gevalle. God het ons ’n manier gegee om daarvan vry te kom: Jesus. Maar ons bly sterflik – ons moet almal eendag doodgaan.’ Sy bly ’n rukkie stil. ‘Die Aarde is nie ons eintlike tuiste nie, Shamika.’

Shamika vryf met haar duim oor haar ringvinger. ‘Jalen se pa het my verlaat toe ek ses weke swanger was. Ek het gedink: As hy my nie kan liefhê nie, kan niemand nie. Nie eens God nie.’

Mary Catherine sit haar hand teen Shamika se wang. ‘Dis nie waar nie. God is lief vir jou. Hy het ’n plan met jou en Jalen, en dit is ’n goeie plan. Selfs nou.’ Die verwarring is duidelik op Shamika se gesig te lees. ‘Niks van hierdie ding is goed nie.’

‘Nee.’ Mary Catherine voel gefrustreerd. Sy help glad nie. ‘Natuurlik nie.’

‘Nou wat beteken dit dan?’ Shamika se oë is weer vol tranen. ‘God het ons lief. Hy het ’n goeie plan met ons. Maar hier sit ons, in die hospitaal, en Jalen kan enigiets oomblik sterf.’

Daar is nie eenvoudige antwoorde nie. ‘Ek weet net dat God almagtig is. As ons Hom kies, sal ons eendag in die ewigheid saam wees. Daar is nie trane of hartseer of pyn nie. Geen geskiet en benedegeweld nie. Geen eensame nagte nie. Nooit weer nie.’

Haar tranen val nou vinniger. ‘Ek wil net my seuntjie terughê. Hy moet lewe en lag ... soos hy drie uur gelede gedoen het.’

Mary Catherine vat weer Shamika se hande in hare. ‘Kom ons bid dan. Kom ons vra die Here om dit vir ons te gee.’

‘Goed.’ Shamika lyk soos ’n klein dogtertjie, desperaat en verdwaal. Sy hou Mary Catherine se hande styf vas. ‘Asseblief ... bid vir ons.’

Mary Catherine knik. ‘Liewe Here ...’ Sy begin huil; haar tranen val op haar skoot. Die klein seuntjie was so gelukkig, so vol vertroue dat die lewe altyd goed sal wees. Vol liefde en vreugde en pret. Sy probeer woorde vind. ‘Here, ons verstaan nie hoe boosheid werk en waarom hierdie dinge gebeur nie. Maar ons het u hulp nodig om hierdeur te kom.’ Sy sukkel om haar stem egalig te hou. ‘Vader, ons vra dat U ’n wonderwerk vir Jalen sal doen. Dat hy sal lewe en lag en gou weer sal wees soos hy ’n paar uur gelede was. Ons vra dit in die Naam van Jesus, amen.’

Na die gebed gee sy Shamika ’n drukkie. ‘Kan ek jou my telefoonnommer gee? Ek sal bly wees as jy my op hoogte hou van sy vordering.’

Hulle ruil telefoonnommers uit en Shamika begin net vertel dat Jalen oor ’n paar weke verjaar, toe die dokter ’n deur op die punt van die gang oopmaak en na hulle toe kom.

Sy gesig is ernstig, en hy lyk bekommerd. ‘Ons het gedoen wat ons kan. Ons het die koeël verwyder. Hy rus nou.’

Shamika staan op. ‘Is hy ... kan hy op sy eie asemhaal?’

‘Nee.’ Die dokter lyk besorgd. ‘Hy is op die masjiene.’ Hy bly stil. ‘Ek moet eerlik met u wees, mevrou Johnson. Jalen sal moontlik nie die nag oorleef nie. Hy is ’n vegter, maar die skade ... is groot.’

Shamika begin saggies snik. Mary Catherine staan langs haar en kyk na die dokter. ‘Gaan julle hom hierheen bring?’

‘Ja, nou-nou.’ Hy sit sy hand op Shamika se arm. ‘Hy is bewusteloos. Wanneer hy in sy kamer is, kan jy met hom praat. Dit is moontlik dat hy jou hoor.’

Mary Catherine help Shamika die kamer in, en sy begin weer huil. Sy hou haar hande voor haar gesig en probeer die snikke keer. ‘Nie my seuntjie nie, Here ... asseblief ... bring hom terug na my toe. Ek kan nie ...’

Dit is asof Shamika glad nie kan beweeg nie. Nie na die bed toe nie, nie na die stoel toe waarheen Mary Catherine haar wil lei nie. Glad nie. Mary Catherine bid saggies. *Here, gee haar u vrede en krag. Help haar om sterk te wees ter wille van haar seuntjie. Wys ons dat U hier is. Asseblief.*

Mary Catherine voel hoe die vrou geleidelik begin ontspaan. Na ’n rukkie bring hulle Jalen na die kamer toe. Hy lyk klein, verlore tussen die lakens en verbande, buise en drade. Mary Catherine bly by Shamika toe sy langs haar seun gaan sit.

‘Ek is bang,’ fluister sy. Sy haal haar hande weg voor haar gesig. Jalen se kop is heeltemal toe onder die verbande en hy haal deur ’n buisie in sy mond en keel asem.

Shamika sit haar hand op Jalen se klein handjie. ‘Jalen, Mamma is hier.’ Sy laat haar kop sak, en haal vinnig asem. Dis duidelik dat sy veg om beheer te behou. Dan lig sy haar kop op, kyk na haar seun en vryf sag met haar kneukels oor sy wang. ‘Mamma is hier by jou. Jesus ook. Alles gaan regkom.’ Sy vee die trane met haar ander hand af. ‘Hou net aan veg, Jalen. Dit sal jou sterker maak.’ Sy kyk na Mary Catherine en dis asof daar ’n klein sprankie hoop in haar oë flikker. Sy draai terug na Jalen toe. ‘Ons gaan al twee sterker word.’

Die deur gaan oop en ’n ouerige verpleegster steek haar kop in. ‘Mary Catherine?’

‘Ja?’ Sy draai na die vrou.

‘Jou vriende is hier. Hulle wil met jou praat.’

Mary Catherine gee weer vir Shamika ’n drukkie. ‘Wil jy hê ek moet bly? Ek kan maklik verlof neem.’

‘Nee, dis nie nodig nie. Ek wil graag alleen by my seuntjie wees.’

‘Ek verstaan.’ Mary Catherine kyk ondersoekend na Shamika. ‘Bel my of stuur ’n SMS as jy enige iets nodig het. Ons sal almal vra om vir Jalen te bid, kan ons?’

‘Ja.’ Sy kry dit reg om effens te glimlag. ‘Dankie.’

‘Jy is nie alleen nie.’

Shamika knik en draai weer na Jalen. ‘Ek sal hier wees. Tot hy sy oë oopmaak en met my praat.’

Dit is al wat hulle kan vra. Dat Shamika se geloof sterk genoeg sal wees om die onmoontlike te glo. Om ’n wonderwerk te verwag.

Mary Catherine gaan uit. Tyler en Sami wag vir haar. Sami gee haar ’n drukkie. ‘Hoe gaan dit met hom?’

‘Hy veg.’ Sy sluk die trane weg. ‘Die dokter sê dit lyk nie baie goed nie.’ Sy haal ’n snesie uit haar handsak en druk dit voor haar oë. ‘Ons moet bid vir ’n wonderwerk. Ons moet glo.’

‘Arme outjie.’ Tyler sit sy arm om Sami.

Sami sug. ‘Ons het almal vir hom gebid in Marcus se kamer.’

Mary Catherine wil nie aan Marcus dink nie. ‘Bly hy oornag hier?’ Die tyd saam met Shamika het haar goed gedoen. Sy het nie eenkeer gedink aan Shelly wat langs Marcus sit nie, of aan die uitwerking wat dit op haar hart gehad het nie.

‘Nee.’ Tyler staan nader. ‘Shelly en die Waynes is weg. Ek dink die dokters is nog besig met die papierwerk. Ons kan hom huis toe neem.’ Hulle vier is almal afhanklik van Tyler se motor. ‘Sal ons eers gaan en jou later kom haal?’

‘Ek sal binne ’n paar minute reg wees. Ek sal julle onder in die portaal kry.’ Sy neem Sami se hand. ‘Is dit reg so?’

‘Natuurlik.’ Sami lyk ook gedaan. Net soos hulle almal. Sy en Tyler omhels Mary Catherine weer. Langer as netnou. Toe loop hulle na die hysbak toe.

Mary Catherine het ’n klein kapelletjie in die gang raakgesien. Sy wil nie Shamika se tyd saam met haar seun onderbreek nie, en sy wil ook nie by Marcus wees nie. Nie nadat sy hom vroeër saam met Shelly gesien het nie. Nie vanaand nie. Nie voor sy haar emosies onder beheer gekry het nie.

Sy wag tot Sami en Tyler weg is, en gaan dan na die kapel toe. Dit is regoor die hysbak. Sy gaan in. Dis leeg.

Die kamer is klein en dof verlig. Net agt banke en ’n houtkruis voor in die vertrek. Sy gaan sit eers op een van die middelste banke, maar dan kniel sy en vou haar hande saam voor haar gesig. Sy bid vir Jalen en sy ma en vir die toekoms van die jeugsentrum. Sy bid dat die moordenaar gevang word en dat dit eendag beter sal gaan in die strate van die middestad van Los Angeles.

Eers dan praat sy met die Here oor die dinge wat die swaarste op haar hart druk. Haar woorde kom in sagte fluisterings. ‘Ek het toegelaat dat ek verlief

raak op Marcus, Here ... dit was 'n fout. Ek is jammer. Dit is nie die lewe wat U vir my wil hê nie. U het dit duidelik gemaak. Beskerm my brose hart, Here. Asseblief. As ek Marcus sien, laat ek hom beskou as 'n broer. Net dit. In Jesus se Naam. Amen.'

Sy lig haar kop op, en snak na haar asem. Oorkant haar sit 'n polisieman. Groot en blond, sy pet in sy hande. Hy kyk na haar en knik. 'Jammer as ek jou laat skrik het. Ek wou nie onderbreek nie.'

'Is iets ... is Jalen ...?'

'Nee. Die seun is nog met ons. Jou gebede is belangrik, Mary Catherine. Hou aan bid.'

'Ja, ek sal.' Sy snuif en kyk na hom, probeer die naam op sy uniform lees. 'Het ek jou al ontmoet? By die sentrum?'

'Nee.' Hy sit sy pet op. 'Ek is offisier Jag. Ek is nie van hierdie distrik nie, maar ek was daar toe Marcus geskiet is. Ek wou jou net op hoogte bring.'

Mary Catherine voel hoe haar hart vinniger begin klop. 'Het hulle hom gekry? Die skieteer?'

'Ja. Dwayne Davis is agter tralies, waar hy sal bly. Maar die meisie ... sy is baie jonk. Sy het nog 'n kans.'

'Watter meisie?' Mary Catherine draai om in die bank sodat sy die man beter kan sien. Hy het ongewone oë, asof hulle honderde kleure het. En dis asof vrede van hom uitstraal. Miskien is dit sy uniform. Sy is nie seker nie.

'Die meisie is Lexy Jones. Sy is Dwayne se meisie. Sy was op 'n baie donker pad.' Die polisieman het duidelik nog iets op die hart. Hy kyk na die deur van die kapel asof hy haastig is. 'In elk geval, Marcus het oor die Skrik wakker!-program uitgevra.'

Dis waar. Mary Catherine weet daarvan. 'Hulle het gesê dit werk nie baie goed nie.'

'Ons het nou 'n ander program. Dis nuut, en het 'n bietjie meer om die lyf. Dit word Laaste Keer In genoem. Kinders kry 'n toer van die tronk, en die inwoners vertel hulle die waarheid oor hoe dit is om daar te wees. Dan kry hulle vier weke lank berading, drie keer 'n week. Dit is intens, maar dit kan werk.'

Mary Catherine knik. Sy hou van die idee. 'Het jy Marcus daarvan vertel?'

'Ek kan nie bly nie. Ek het gehoop jy sal.'

'Goed.' Mary Catherine het so pas vir die Here gevra om haar 'n bietjie weg te neem van Marcus af. En nou dit. 'Is die program hier beskikbaar?'

'Ja, maar hulle het fondse nodig om daarmee voort te gaan. Tien duisend dollar.' Hy staan op en beweeg na die gangetjie toe. Hy hou sy hand uit na Mary Catherine. 'As jy dit vir Marcus Dillinger kan vertel, sal ek dit waardeer.'

‘Goed, ek sal.’ Mary Catherine staan op en neem die man se hand. En dit is asof daar dadelik ’n band tot in haar siel is. Asof daar krag in sy aanraking is. Hulle oë ontmoet en Mary Catherine kry die eienaardigste gevoel. Asof sy op heilige grond staan.

‘Oor jou gebede. Onthou net ... God weet beter as ons. Altyd. Selfs wanneer dinge nie sin maak nie.’ Hy kyk weer na die deur. ‘Hou aan bid.’

Hy kyk nog eenmaal met sy blink oë na haar, en toe is hy weg.

Mary Catherine is vol vrae. Hoe het die polisieman geweet waar sy is? En hoe het hy geweet sy ken vir Marcus? Hoe het hy haar naam geken? Sy kry geen antwoorde nie. Die verpleegster het seker gesien sy kom hierheen, en vir hom gesê. En miskien het die verpleegster ook geweet saam met wie sy gekom het, en dat hulle vir Marcus kom besoek het.

Daar kan tog nie ’n ander verklaring wees nie, of hoe?

Die polisieman se hoofdoel was om haar te vra om vir Marcus van die Laaste Keer In-program te vertel. Die idee klink goed. Kinders soos Lexy Jones gaan beslis nie wegbly van die bendes af en geweld afsweer net omdat ’n jeugsentrum in die buurt oopgemaak het nie. Hulle het meer nodig.

As die program geld nodig het, kan Mary Catherine dit voorsien. Haar ouers het vir haar ’n rekening oopgemaak en hulle sit elke jaar met haar verjaardag geld daarin. Sy het dit nie nodig nie en het dit nog nooit gebruik nie. Sy het haar voorgeneem om dit te gebruik om iemand anders te help.

En hier het sy nou die heel beste manier gevind.

Nou moet sy net vir Marcus vertel. Sy wil nie vandag met hom praat nie. En in die lig van Jalen se lewensbedreigende beserings en die skietery kan die nuus maar ’n bietjie wag. Ten minste tot môre.

Maar met wie is Marcus veronderstel om oor die program te praat? Offisier Jag het gesê hy is van ’n ander distrik, en sy weet nie wie die kontakpersoon is nie. Mary Catherine gaan vinnig by die kapel uit en tuur in die gang af. Die man is skaars ’n minuut gelede weg.

Waar is hy dan?

Sy loop so vinnig sy kan na die verpleegsters se diensstasie. Dis dieselfde vrou wat agter die toonbank sit. ‘Hallo ... offisier Jag het na die kapel toe gekom om met my te praat. Kan jy vir my sê waarheen hy gegaan het?’

Die vrou knip haar oë. ‘Offisier Jag?’

‘Ja. Hy is lank en het blonde hare. Ligte oë.’ Sy kan sien die vrou weet nie waarvan sy praat nie. ‘Hy moes hier verbygekom het.’

‘Nee, hier was nie polisiemanne in hierdie gang nie. In elk geval nie die afgelope uur nie.’

Die frustrasie laat Mary Catherine onseker voel. ‘Hy was dan nou net hier.’ Sy wys na die kapel. ‘Hy het daar uitgekom.’

‘Ek is jammer, juffie.’ Die vrou lyk verontwaardig. ‘Ek het jou mos gesê. Ek het nie ’n polisieman gesien nie. En beslis nie een soos jy beskryf het nie.’ Sy bly stil. ‘Wat sê jy is sy naam?’

‘Offisier Jag.’ Sy besef skielik sy ken nie sy van nie. ‘Hy het gesê hy is van ’n ander distrik ...’ Mary Catherine voel hoe haar skouers hang. ‘Toemaar wat.’ Sy draf met die gang af, verby die kapel tot aan die punt van die gang. Daar is nie ’n uitgang nie. Die enigste manier hoe die polisieman kon uitgaan, is by die verpleegster se stasie verby. Mary Catherine draai weer daarheen, maar die vrou is verdiep in haar werk.

Dit is seker maar wat gebeur het. Die verpleegster was te besig om die man raak te sien.

Mary Catherine sug en stap na die hysbak toe. Haar vriende wag seker al vir haar. Op pad na die uitgang onthou sy sy woorde oor gebed. *God weet beter as ons. Altyd. Selfs wanneer dinge nie sin maak nie.*

Dit was mos wat hy gesê het, nie waar nie? Hy het sekerlik van Jalen gepraat. Die klein outjie het almal se gebede en geloof nodig. Dit is ’n goeie ding dat die polisieman ’n gelowige is.

Die stad het meer polisiemanne soos hy nodig, waar hy ook al vandaan kom. Sy gaan na Marcus se kamer. Hy sit regop, en ’n verpleegster is besig om hom instruksies en ontslagvorme te gee. Tyler en Sami wag naby die deur.

Marcus kyk na haar. ‘Hoe gaan dit met hom?’

‘Nie so goed nie.’ Sy bly by die deur by die ander twee. ‘Hy het ’n wonderwerk nodig.’

Die rit huis toe is stil. Marcus sit voor by Tyler, en hulle twee doen die meeste van die praatwerk. ‘Die polisie was daar nadat julle weg is.’ Marcus leun met sy kop teen die sitplek. Hy lyk gedaan. ‘Hulle het die verdagte in hegtenis geneem. Sy meisie ook.’

‘Gaaf.’ Tyler twyfel nie ’n oomblik nie. ‘Ek dink hulle moet sommer almal in al twee bendes arresteer. Kyk wat op hul rekords is. Watter oortredings hulle al begaan het.’ Hy kyk na Marcus, en sy hand klem stywer om die stuurwiel. ‘Miskien sal die jongetjies dan nie so haastig wees om aan te sluit nie.’

Mary Catherine sit stil. Sy kyk by die venster uit en dink aan Shamika wat die hele nag langs haar seun se bed gaan waak. Die gesprek in die motor vervaag en Mary Catherine kyk op na die sterre.

Natuurlik kan God dit doen. Hy kan ’n wonderwerk vir Jalen doen.

Sy kan maar net bid dat Hy sal.

~

Jag en Aspyen staan aan weerskante van Jalen se bed. Hulle is onsigbaar en Aspyen is, soos Jag, gereed vir die stryd wat voorlê. Sy wil hê hul sending

moet slaag, en sy wil sien dat geregtigheid seëvier.

‘Die aarde is so moeilik ... so vol pyn.’ Sy hou haar hand oor die seuntjie se kop. ‘Here Jesus, maak hom gesond. Laat hom lewe.’

Jag bewonder sy spanmaat se groot hart. Sy is ’n voorbeeld vir hom, veral na vanaand. ‘My woede ... dit het my amper ondergekry.’

Sy draai om en staar hom aan. ‘Dwayne Davis?’

‘Ja.’ Jag voel nog steeds skaam. Die gevoel van die sneller onder sy vinger sal hom altyd bybly. ‘Ek kon daardie seun doodgeskiet het. Ek wou.’

Hulle moet eerlik met mekaar wees, wat ook al die prys. Aspyn kyk na hom. ‘Waarom het jy nie?’

‘Ek’s ’n engel. Ek wil God se wil doen. Jesus se Naam het my daaraan herinner.’

Aspyn sug verlig. ‘Wie het dit gesê?’

‘Lexy. Die meisie.’ Hy staan regop, vervul met krag, oortuig dat sy volmaakte God by hom is, selfs in sy onvolmaaktheid. ‘God het haar gebruik om my aandag te trek. Net betyds.’

‘Sy het hulp nodig.’ Aspyn klink bedruk. Sy kyk weer na Jalen. ‘Daar is so baie stukkies en brokkies in hierdie sending. Ons kan eenvoudig nie vir ’n oomblik lank laat slaplê nie.’

Dit was nog nooit so waar nie. ‘Ek het in die kapel met Mary Catherine gepraat.’

‘Dink jy sy vermoed? Wie ons is?’

‘Nee.’ Hy besef dat hy nog ’n rede tot berou het. ‘Ek was nie so versigtig met Dwayne nie. Die ouens op straat dink ek is ’n soort super-polisieman. Ek moet versigtiger wees.’ Hy kyk diep in haar oë. ‘Ek is jammer. Ek het met die Vader daaroor gepraat.’

‘Dan is jy vergewe.’ Aspyn hou ’n oomblik lank sy hand vas. ‘Laat vaar.’ Sy beweeg weer nader aan die bed en bestudeer die kind. ‘Die moeilikste ding van die aarde is dat liefde nie genoeg is nie. Dis nooit genoeg nie.’

Jag wag tot haar woorde diep in sy siel gaan lê het. Hy skud sy kop. ‘Liefde is altyd genoeg, Aspyn. Maar daar is verskillende soorte liefde.’

‘Dis waar.’ Sy kyk na die monitors wat die kind omring. ‘Hierdie kind is besig om swakker te word. Ons moet bid.’

Die res van die aand smee hulle God om ’n wonderwerk en vra dat Hy sal ingryp in Jalen se lyfie, en die dokters wysheid bo hul vermoë sal gee. Maar die meeste van die tyd vra hulle dat Jalen deur liefde omring sal wees. Nie die aardse soort liefde wat maklik kan faal nie.

Hemelse liefde.

’n Liefde wat altyd genoeg is.



MARCUS WAS IN THE middle of an upper body workout in his home gym the next morning when he received the text from Mary Catherine. He hadn't known what to say to her last night, how to bring up the fact that he hadn't asked Shelly Wayne to come to the hospital.

None of it mattered compared to the shooting. He'd gotten word from Officer Kent an hour earlier that Jalen had survived the night. He was still on life support. Still critical.

Now Marcus looked at his phone. The text said simply, *Can we meet this morning? If you're feeling up to it? I need to talk to you about something related to the shooting.*

Marcus had no idea what she wanted to talk about. He only knew that he wanted to see her. More than he wanted to do anything else today. He moved his fingers across his phone. *Definitely. I'd like that. How about eleven o'clock at the Silver Lake Whole Foods. They've got great coffee.*

Her response took a few minutes. *Great. See you then.*

The last thing he wanted was to finish his workout. He was out of danger, barring infection, but his leg throbbed. He couldn't run for a week, but otherwise he'd be fine. The bullet had only grazed him. Aspyr, the woman from the neighborhood, had saved his life.

Last night at the hospital Officer Kent had come by and Marcus had brought up the woman's name. "She pushed me out of the way before the guy fired. Almost like she knew what was going to happen."

"I saw the whole thing." The officer shook his head. "Like she had some sort of advance warning."

"Did you check her out? I mean . . . I guess I wondered if she knew something."

"She's not from the area. No record of her in any of the searches. But we don't think she was involved."

Marcus picked up a pair of fifty-pound dumbbells. Good that Aspyr wasn't working for a gang. But how had she known to push him out of the way? And how come she hadn't been hit? The whole night still didn't add up, but none of it mattered. Not compared with Jalen's struggle to live.

He pushed through his routine for another thirty minutes and then

showered and shaved. If this were a different situation, he would've been thrilled at the chance to have coffee with Mary Catherine. But today would be different; he could feel it. Different from how things had been the other night when they walked around his neighborhood.

The incident with Shelly last night had changed things.

Mary Catherine's text had more of a businesslike feel. She was keeping her distance. Not that he blamed her. He really needed to call Shelly and let her know things weren't working out. The difficult part was Coach Wayne. His coach was also his friend, and the last thing Marcus wanted was to hurt the man's niece.

The whole situation was complicated.

He got ready faster than he expected and found a booth at Whole Foods a few minutes earlier than eleven. A baseball cap low on his brow would keep people from recognizing him—something that was rarely a problem. He was six-three and built like an athlete. But in a city like Los Angeles, Marcus didn't stand out unless he was in uniform.

Five minutes later he watched Mary Catherine arrive and he felt a little dizzy. The girl had captured his attention and maybe even his heart. No matter how poorly last night had gone, no matter how sad everyone was, he couldn't put into words how great it was to see Mary Catherine now.

She spotted him and as she approached she seemed to do her best to avoid a hug. They walked together to the coffee bar, poured their drinks, and then returned to the booth. "I heard from Shamika on the way in." Mary Catherine took the spot opposite him. "No change for Jalen."

"No." Marcus leaned his forearms on the table and waited. The fact that the child had taken the bullet intended for him was still more than he could bear. He stared at his drink and after a long moment he took a sip.

"Thanks for meeting." She seemed less comfortable than she'd been the other night. The shooting had deeply affected them all. "Last night, after I visited with Shamika, I went to the chapel."

"On the ICU floor?"

Mary Catherine nodded. "It's small. I was the only one there. At least at first." Her tone was intent, as if whatever was coming was very serious. "When I finished praying, I opened my eyes and there was a police officer there. Sitting across the aisle from me."

"Charlie Kent?"

"No." She put her hands around her cup of coffee. "His name was Jag. Officer Jag, that's what he called himself." She shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't get his full name."

Marcus wished he'd worn a sweatshirt. The morning had been cold for

Southern California. Not quite sixty degrees yet. They were inside, but a chill hung over the Whole Foods booth. “Jag. Sounds familiar.”

“He said he wasn’t from here.” She looked out the window and then back at Marcus. “He told me about a new program. It’s called Last Time In. He wanted me to tell you about it.”

Strange, Marcus thought, *that he’d find Mary Catherine and ask her to bring the message.* “Why didn’t he come tell me himself?”

“He was in a hurry.”

“Oh.” Marcus wasn’t sure where this was going or why the officer wanted him to know. “Tell me about the program.”

Mary Catherine pulled some paperwork from her purse. “I stopped by the police station on my way here.” She spread the documents on the table in front of her. “Charlie Kent gave me this. It looks amazing.”

For the next ten minutes Mary Catherine went over the information. The program was created by a couple of police officers, looking for an alternative to the Scared Straight program. “Prison is always scary, of course.” Mary Catherine sounded more relaxed than when she first arrived. “But this takes kids beyond the scared part.”

The program involved a prison tour with volunteers acting as chaperones. Police guards would introduce a group of young offenders to actual prisoners. “So they get a realistic picture of prison?” Marcus liked that part. There had to be a sense of reality if the program was going to make a difference.

“Definitely.” Mary Catherine turned to the last page of the paperwork. “What makes it different is the group meetings after the prison tour.”

Apparently the meetings were run by the same people who volunteered as chaperones. “I’m assuming the volunteers have to be cleared by police?” Marcus looked up, straight into Mary Catherine’s eyes. She was more beautiful every day. At least it seemed that way.

“Yes, and trained.” Mary Catherine took another drink of her coffee. “It’s freezing in here.”

“I know.” He held his cup and let the steam warm his face. “I have an idea.” He stood and nodded to the store. “I’ll be right back.”

Marcus jogged to the clothing section at the front of the store. His leg didn’t hurt as bad as it had this morning. In no time he found two navy blue sweatshirts with white writing that said simply, “Live Life.” *Perfect*, he told himself. He grabbed a small for her and a large for himself, paid for them, and hurried back to the booth.

“Here.” He handed her the small one. “Maybe now we can actually think.”

She laughed and the sound was music to his soul. There hadn’t been a reason even to smile since last night. “Thank you.” She took it from him,

removed the tags, and slipped it over her head. “Mmmm. Much better.” Her smile remained. “I love impulsive.”

“I figured.” He put his sweatshirt on and instantly felt better. “Okay. Where were we?” He had to be careful around her. She had a way of making him forget what he was doing, what he was saying.

“The program.” She furrowed her brow, like she was trying to find the serious place from a few minutes ago. “So, it’s all voluntary. The kids have to sign up, and they have to agree to the weekly meetings. Volunteers can share their faith as long as they’re clear about it up front. It’s up to the kids and their guardians if that type of counseling will work for them. The group meetings are very loosely structured. More of a time for kids to open up.”

Marcus was starting to understand. “So Bible study could be a part of the group meetings?”

“Exactly. It’s a private program. Police involvement is voluntary and outside official work hours.” She looked at the paperwork on the table and then at him again. “As long as the kids agree to be led by that volunteer, then the group can take whatever direction of encouragement everyone agrees on.”

“Wow. Amazing.” Marcus hadn’t heard of anything like it. “So this officer, he wanted me to know?”

“He did.” Mary Catherine took a sip of her drink and then sat back, pensive. “Last Time In costs around ten grand. Without that there’s no program. Maybe Officer Jag thought you could help.”

“Of course.” Marcus leaned forward, his arms on the table. Mary Catherine looked adorable in her sweatshirt. She could’ve designed it herself. He forced himself to focus. “I can get the money to Officer Kent today. Is that how it works?”

“Actually”—she smiled—“it’s taken care of. Don’t worry about it.”

Marcus was surprised. But the topic seemed off limits. Maybe one day he would be close enough to Mary Catherine to know where the money had come from and what other secrets she hadn’t shared. He guessed there were many. “Great.” He nodded. “So how do I help?”

“You chaperone.” Mary Catherine looked straight at him. “Charlie Kent says most of the kids from the streets love you. Whatever you tell them to do, they’ll do it.”

“Not Dwayne Davis.” He raised his brow.

“But his girlfriend, Lexy Jones. She’s a different story.” Mary Catherine began folding up the papers in front of her. “Police think she made the call, the one that tipped off the department about the fact that someone from the WestKnights wanted you dead.”

“His girlfriend?” Marcus tried to imagine that life.

Over the next few minutes Mary Catherine explained more of the details. The police wanted to offer Lexy a chance at the Last Time In program. "It's either that or she serves five years. At least. She was in the passenger seat when Dwayne fired." Mary Catherine frowned. "Even if she tried to save your life by tipping off the police."

"Has anyone talked to Lexy about it?" Marcus liked the idea. If someone could reach the girl now, it might change her life. It might save it.

"No. She's in jail for now."

Marcus remembered something he hadn't asked Charlie Kent. "How old were these kids?"

"Dwayne's eighteen. They have evidence he committed at least two other murders. He can be tried as an adult, so he's probably looking at life." Mary Catherine sighed. "Lexy . . . she's just sixteen."

"Man." Marcus shook his head. He looked down at his empty cup. The problem was so much bigger than he ever imagined. *God, whatever You want me to do, I'll do it.* He met Mary Catherine's eyes again. "If you're asking if I'll volunteer, the answer is yes."

"Good." Her smile started in her eyes. "I told them I would, too. I'll talk to Sami and Tyler later. They'd be perfect. The whole program takes about four weeks. It's one Saturday and then eight weeknights."

"Perfect. I leave for spring training February eighth." Marcus felt his hope surge. He checked the calendar on his phone. "The timing couldn't be better."

"So . . . that's why we had to meet today." She looked hesitant. "Training starts tomorrow at noon and again Friday night. Saturday is the prison tour. Not a lot of warning." She paused. "I guess usually the volunteers are family or friends of the kids who go through the program. The police volunteers oversee it, but the others who help out usually have a personal reason why they're involved."

Marcus uttered a sad chuckle. "I guess after last night we're qualified."

"Yes." Mary Catherine slid the folded documents across the table. "Look these over." She checked the time on her phone. "I have to run. If you don't hear from me, I'll see you tomorrow night at the police station a few blocks from the youth center. The one on Fourth."

Apparently their time together was over. Marcus stood and waited while Mary Catherine stepped out of the booth. Again she seemed in too much of a hurry for a hug. She did smile, though. "Thanks for meeting. I think this will help. Really."

"I hope so." Marcus didn't have time to say anything else. She was already distancing herself from him. "Thanks for including me." He raised his hand. "See you tomorrow."

She waved and then turned and headed for the exit. Before he had time to think of what to do next she was gone. He picked up the papers from the table and slipped them into the back pocket of his jeans. There was still so much more he wanted to say. He would've wondered whether the last hour had happened at all if not for two things. His navy sweatshirt with the words "Live Life."

And the faint smell of her perfume.



SHE COULDN'T HAVE stayed another moment. Mary Catherine rushed across the parking lot to her car and left in record time. Another minute with Marcus and she would've cracked. She would've asked him why Shelly had been there last night and what he was doing with a girl he didn't really care about.

Her eyes would've given her away and Marcus would've known for sure what she was feeling. How she had never felt more drawn to a guy in all her life. She had tried to talk herself out of everything she felt for him. Nothing about it made sense, and most certainly nothing would ever come from it.

But until she could figure herself out, she couldn't allow Marcus to know any of this.

Not until she was home did she remember the sweatshirt. She looked down and thought again of the sweet, impulsive moment. Marcus running through the store getting them both warmer clothes. Once she was inside she looked at herself in the mirror.

Marcus had no idea how apropos the message was. "Live Life." Yes, that's exactly what she needed to do. And she needed to do so without thinking about Marcus Dillinger. Especially over the next few days. *Treat him like a brother*, she told herself. Yes, she had to learn to think about Marcus differently, stop herself from reacting every time she was with him.

No matter what her heart had to say about it.

Hoofstuk 15

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M

arcus is besig met bolyf-oefeninge in sy tuisgimnasium toe hy die SMS van Mary Catherine kry. Hy het gisteraand nie geweet wat om vir haar te sê nie,

hoe om haar te laat verstaan dat hy Shelly nie gevra het om hospitaal toe te kom nie.

Maar niks daarvan maak saak in die lig van die skietery nie. Hy het 'n boodskap van offisier Kent gekry dat Jalen die nag oorleef het. Hy is egter nog aan masjiene gekoppel en sy toestand is nog kritiek.

Nou kyk Marcus na sy selfoon, en lees weer die SMS: *Kan ons vanoggend iewers ontmoet? As jy gesond genoeg voel. Ek moet met jou praat oor iets in verband met die skietery.*

Marcus weet glad nie waaroor sy wil praat nie. Hy weet wel dat hy haar wil sien. Meer as enige iets anders wat hy vandag moet doen. Hy begin sy antwoord intik: *Definitief. Wil jou graag sien. Wat van elfuur by Silver Lake Gesondheidskos? Hul koffie is heerlik.*

Haar antwoord kom na 'n paar minute. *Reg. Sien jou daar.*

Die laaste ding wat hy nou wil doen, is om aan te hou oefen. Hy loop nie meer die gevaar van infeksie nie, maar sy been klop van die pyn. Hy sal vir 'n week nie kan hardloop nie, maar origens is daar nie probleme nie. Die koeël het hom net geskraap. Aspy, die vrou uit die buurt, het sy lewe gered.

Toe offisier Kent die vorige aand by die hospitaal was, het Marcus van haar gepraat. 'Sy het my platgeduik net voor die man geskiet het. Amper asof sy geweet het wat gaan gebeur.'

'Ek het die hele ding gesien.' Die offisier skud sy kop. 'Asof sy vooraf 'n waarskuwing van 'n aard gekry het.'

'Het jy ondersoek ingestel? Ek bedoel ... ek het gewonder of sy dalk iets weet.'

'Sy kom nie van hier rond nie. Ons kon geen rekord van haar opspoor nie. Ek is seker sy is nie betrokke nie.'

Marcus tel twee 25 kg-handgewigte op. Hy is bly Aspy werk nie vir 'n bende nie. Maar hoe het sy geweet sy moet hom uit die pad kry? En hoekom is sy nie self raakgeskiet nie? Daar is baie dinge oor gisteraand wat nie lekker uitwerk nie, maar dit maak nie saak nie. Nie as hy aan Jalen se stryd om te oorleef dink nie.

Hy oefen vir nog 'n halfuur en toe gaan hy stort en skeer. In enige ander situasie sou hy opgewonde gewees het oor die kans om saam met Mary Catherine koffie te drink. Maar vandag gaan anders wees, hy voel dit aan. Anders as die aand toe hulle gaan stap het.

Die insident met Shelly gisteraand het alles verander.

Mary Catherine se SMS klink saaklik. Sy hou hom op 'n afstand. Nie dat hy haar kan blameer nie. Hy moet regtig met Shelly praat, en verduidelik dat dinge tussen hulle nie gaan werk nie. Die moeilike deel is Ollie Wayne. Sy afrigter is ook sy vriend, en die laaste ding wat Marcus wil doen, is om sy

niggie seer te maak.

Die hele situasie is ingewikkeld.

Hy is gouer gereed as wat hy ver wag het en 'n paar minute voor elf soek hy al vir hulle 'n sitplek uit by die restaurant. Sy bofbalpet is laag oor sy oë getrek om te verhinder dat mense hom herken – nie dat dit dikwels gebeur nie. Hy is twee meter lank en soos 'n sportman gebou. Maar in 'n stad soos Los Angeles staan 'n mens nie uit tensy jy 'n uniform dra nie.

Vyf minute later sit en kyk hy hoe Mary Catherine inkom, en hy voel dadelik 'n bietjie duiselig. Die meisie trek hom aan; dalk het sy al 'n stukkie van sy hart verower. Ten spyte van gisteraand se gebeure en almal se hartseer is hy onverbloemd bly om Mary Catherine te sien, meer as wat hy in woorde kan uitdruk.

Sy sien hom en kom nader, en hy kan sien sy wil 'n drukkies vermy. Hulle loop saam na die koffietoonbank, kry hul koffie en gaan terug na die tafel. 'Ek het op pad hierheen van Shamika gehoor.' Mary Catherine gaan sit oorkant hom. 'Daar is nog geen verandering nie.'

'Nee.' Marcus leun op sy voorarms en wag. Hy kan dit nie verdra dat die kind die koeël gekry het wat vir hom bedoel was nie. Hy staar na sy koffie en na 'n lang ruk neem hy 'n sluk.

'Dankie dat jy my sien.' Mary Catherine is nie vanoggend so gemaklik soos voorheen nie. Die skietery het hulle almal diep ontroer. 'Ek was gisteraand in die kapel nadat ek by Shamika was.'

'Op die hoë sorg-verdieping?'

Mary Catherine knik. 'Dis baie klein. Ek was die enigste een daar. Ten minste aan die begin.' Haar stemtoon is ernstig, asof sy iets van groot belang het om oor te dra. 'Toe ek my oë oopmaak na my gebed, sien ek 'n polisieman. Hy het oorkant die paadjie gesit.'

'Charlie Kent?'

'Nee.' Sy sit haar hande om haar koffiebeker. 'Sy naam is Jag. Offisier Jag, dis wat hy gesê het.' Sy haal haar skouers op. 'Hy het nie sy van gesê nie.'

Marcus wens hy het sy sweetpaktop saamgebring. Die oggend is koud vir Suid-Kalifornië, skaars sestien grade. Hulle sit binne, maar die koue hang oor die restaurant. 'Jag. Dit klink bekend.'

'Hy het gesê hy is nie van hierdie distrik nie.' Sy kyk by die venster uit en dan weer na Marcus. 'Hy het my van 'n nuwe program vertel. Laaste Keer In. Hy wou hê ek moet jou daarvan sê.'

Vreemd, dink Marcus. Waarom het hy Mary Catherine opgesoek en haar gevra om die boodskap te bring? 'Hoekom het hy my nie self kom vertel nie?'

'Hy was haastig.'

'O.' Marcus is nie seker wat hiervan gaan word nie, of waarom die polisieman

wou hê hy moet van die program weet nie. 'Vertel my daarvan.'

Mary Catherine haal papiere uit haar handsak. 'Ek het op pad hierheen by die polisiestasie aangegaan.' Sy sprei die dokumente voor haar op die tafel uit. 'Charlie Kent het dit vir my gegee. Dit lyk baie goed.'

Vir tien minute vertel Mary Catherine vir Marcus van die program. Die program is begin deur polisiemanne wat 'n alternatief vir die Skrik wakker!-program gesoek het. 'Die tronk maak mens bang, natuurlik.' Mary Catherine is nou meer ontspanne as aan die begin. 'Maar hierdie program vat die kinders verder as daardie eerste skrik.'

Die program behels 'n toer deur die tronk, vergesel van vrywilligers. Tronkbewaarders stel dan 'n paar van die tronkbewoners voor aan die jong oortreders. 'Hulle kry dus 'n realistiese beeld van die binnekant van 'n tronk?' Marcus hou daarvan. Die kinders moet die werklikheid beleef as hulle die program wil laat werk.

'O ja, beslis.' Mary Catherine blaai na die laaste bladsy. 'Wat die verskil maak, is die groepbyeenkomste na die toer deur die tronk.'

Die groepe word gelei deur die vrywilligers wat die kinders op die toer geneem het. 'Die polisie moet seker die vrywilligers goedkeur?' Marcus kyk op, reguit in Mary Catherine se oë. Sy word elke dag vir hom mooier. Altans, dis hoe dit voel.

'Ja, en hulle kry ook opleiding.' Mary Catherine vat weer 'n sluk koffie. 'Dis yskoud hier binne.'

'Ek weet.' Hy tel sy beker op sodat die stoom sy gesig warm kan maak. 'Wag, ek het 'n plan.' Hy staan op en wys na die winkel-gedeelte van die restaurant. 'Ek is nou terug.'

Hy draf na die klereafdeling. Sy been is nie meer so seer soos vanoggend nie. Byna dadelik kry hy twee blou sweetpaktops met woorde in wit wat sê: 'Leef die lewe.' *Kan nie beter nie*, dink hy. Hy gryp 'n kleintjie vir haar en 'n grote vir hom, en gaan terug na die tafel toe.

'Hierso.' Hy gee haar die kleintjie. 'Nou sal ons dalk behoorlik kan dink.'

Sy lag, en die geluid is soos musiek vir sy siel. Sedert gisteraand was daar nog nie eens 'n enkele rede om te glimlag nie. 'Dankie.' Sy neem die top, haal die etikette af en trek dit aan. 'Mmm. Dit voel baie beter.' Sy glimlag steeds. 'Ek hou van impulsief.'

'Ek het so gedink.' Hy trek sy top aan en voel dadelik beter. 'Reg. Waar was ons?' Hy moet versigtig wees as hy by haar is. Sy het 'n manier om hom te laat vergeet wat hy doen en wat hy sê.

'Die program.' Sy frons, asof sy weer die ernstige bui van netnou wil vasvang. 'Goed. Dis alles vrywillig. Die kinders moet hulle registreer, en hulle moet ooreenkom om elke week bymekaar te kom. Die vrywilligers kan

oor geloof gesels solank hulle dit van die begin af duidelik maak dat hulle dit gaan doen. Die kinders en hul voogde kan besluit watter tipe berading hulle verkies. Die groepbyeenkomste is nie baie gestruktureerd nie. Daar is baie tyd vir die kinders om oop te maak.’

Marcus begin die konsep verstaan. ‘Bybelstudie kan dus ’n deel van die groepbyeenkoms wees?’

‘O ja. Dit is nie ’n staatsprogram nie. Die polisie se betrokkenheid is vrywillig en buite werksure.’ Sy kyk weer na die papiere voor haar, dan na hom. ‘Solank as wat die kinders instem dat die vrywilliger hul leier kan wees, kan die groep enige metode volg waarop hulle ooreenkom.’

‘Wow. Dit klink wonderlik.’ Marcus het nog nooit van iets soortgelyks gehoor nie. ‘En die offisier wou hê ek moet daarvan weet?’

‘Ja.’ Mary Catherine vat weer ’n sluk koffie en sit dan terug, peinsend. ‘Laaste Keer In kan net begin as hulle \$10 000 het. Miskien het offisier Jag gedink jy kan daarmee help.’

‘Natuurlik.’ Marcus leun vorentoe, sy arms op die tafel. Mary Catherine lyk pragtig in die wollerige sweetpaktop. Asof dit net vir haar ontwerp is. Hy dwing hom om te fokus. ‘Ek kan die geld nog vandag by offisier Kent kry. Is dit hoe dit werk?’

‘Wel, eintlik,’ sê sy met ’n glimlag, ‘is alles al klaar uitgesorteer. Moet jou nie daaroor bekommer nie.’

Marcus is verbaas. Die onderwerp is klaarblyklik nie oop vir bespreking nie. Miskien sal hy en Mary Catherine eendag naby genoeg aan mekaar wees sodat hy sal hoor waar die geld vandaan gekom het. Miskien sal daar ander verrassings wees wat sy nie nou wil vertel nie. Hy is seker daar is baie. ‘Gaaf.’ Hy knik. ‘Hoe kan ek help?’

‘As vrywilliger.’ Mary Catherine kyk reguit na hom. ‘Charlie Kent sê die kinders op straat is mal oor jou. As jy vir hulle sê om iets te doen, sal hulle dit doen.’

‘Nie Dwayne Davis nie.’ Hy lig sy wenkbroue.

‘Nee, maar sy meisie, Lexy, sal. Sy is ’n ander soort mens.’ Mary Catherine begin die papiere bymekaarmaak. ‘Die polisie dink sy is die een wat ingebel het met die wenk dat iemand van die WestKnights jou wil doodmaak.’

‘Sy meisie?’ Marcus probeer hom so ’n lewe indink.

Mary Catherine gee vir hom ’n paar besonderhede. Die polisie wil Lexy graag ’n kans gee om deel te neem aan die Laaste Keer In-program. ‘Dis óf dit óf vyf jaar tronkstraf vir haar. Ten minste. Sy was in die motor toe Dwayne geskiet het.’ Mary Catherine frons. ‘Selfs al het sy jou lewe probeer red deur die polisie in kennis te stel.’

‘Het iemand al met Lexy daaroor gepraat?’ Marcus hou van die plan. As

iemand die meisie nou kan bereik, kan dit haar lewe verander. Dit selfs red.

‘Nee. Sy word aangehou.’

Marcus onthou iets wat hy nie vir Charlie Kent gevra het nie. ‘Hoe oud is hierdie kinders?’

‘Dwayne is agtien. Hulle het bewyse dat hy ten minste twee ander moorde gepleeg het. Hy kan as volwassene verhoor word, dus sal hy waarskynlik lewenslank kry.’ Mary Catherine sug. ‘Lexy ... sy is skaars sestien.’

‘Liewe land.’ Marcus skud sy kop. Hy kyk af na sy leë koffiebeker. Die probleem is baie groter as wat hy gedink het. *Here, wat U ook al wil hê, sal ek doen.* Hy kyk Mary Catherine weer in die oë. ‘As jy vra of ek ’n vrywilliger sal wees, is die antwoord ja.’

‘Wonderlik.’ Haar glimlag begin in haar oë. ‘Ek het ook aangebied. Ek sal later met Sami en Tyler daaroor gesels. Hulle is perfek daarvoor. Die program duur ongeveer vier weke. Een Saterdag en dan agt weeksaande.’

‘Dit sal presies reg uitwerk. Ons lente-oefenprogram begin op die agtste Februarie.’ Marcus voel hoe hy weer hoop kry. Hy kyk vinnig op sy selfoon na sy dagboek. ‘Ons kon nie ’n beter tyd gekry het nie.’

‘So ... dis waarom ek jou vandag wou sien.’ Sy lyk huiwerig. ‘Die opleiding begin môremiddag twaalfuur en dan is daar weer ’n sessie Vrydagaand. Saterdag is die toer deur die tronk. Dis ’n bietjie skielik.’ Sy bly stil. ‘Gewoonlik is die vrywilligers familieleden of vriende van die kinders wat die program deurloop. Die polisie-vrywilligers hou toesig, maar gewoonlik het die vrywilligers ’n persoonlike rede waarom hulle betrokke raak.’

Marcus lag ’n bietjie hartseer. ‘Wel, na gisteraand kwalifiseer ons beslis.’

‘Ja.’ Mary Catherine skuif die papiere na hom toe. ‘Lees dit deur.’ Sy kyk na haar selfoon. ‘Ek moet gaan. As jy nie intussen van my hoor nie, sal ek jou môreaand by die polisiestasie naby die jeugsentrum kry. Die een in Vierdestraat.’

Hulle tydjie saam is klaarblyklik verby. Marcus staan op en wag terwyl Mary Catherine opstaan. Sy lyk weer te haastig vir ’n drukkies. Sy glimlag darem. ‘Dankie dat jy gekom het, Marcus. Ek dink dit sal help. Regtig.’

‘Ek hoop so.’ Daar is nie tyd om iets anders te sê nie. Sy is klaar op pad. ‘Dankie dat jy my insluit.’ Hy lig sy hand. ‘Sien jou môre.’

Sy waai en draai om en stap na buite. Voordat hy kan dink wat hy volgende kan doen, is sy weg. Hy tel die papiere op en steek dit in sy sak. Daar is nog so baie wat hy wou sê. Hy kan maklik wonder of die afgelope uur ooit werklik gebeur het, as dit nie vir twee dinge was nie. Sy nuwe blou sweetpaktop met die woorde ‘Leef die lewe.’

En die vae geur van haar parfuum.

Sy sou nie 'n oomblik langer kon bly nie. Mary Catherine hardloop amper oor die parkeerarea na haar motor en ry soos die wind daar weg. Nog 'n minuut, en sy sou dit nie meer kon keer nie, dis seker. Sy sou hom gevra het waarom Shelly gisteraand daar was en waarom hy met 'n meisie uitgaan vir wie hy nie omgee nie.

Haar oë sou haar weggegee het en Marcus sou haar gevoelens raakgesien het. Sy het nog nooit so aangetrokke tot 'n ou gevoel nie. Sy probeer haarself uitpraat uit alles wat sy vir hom voel. Dit maak glad nie sin nie, en daar kan feitlik sekerlik niks van kom nie.

Totdat sy uitgewerk het wat in haar aan die gang is, kan sy nie toelaat dat Marcus iets agterkom nie.

Eers by die huis onthou sy van die sweetpaktop. Sy kyk af en dink weer aan die mooi, impulsiewe oomblik. Marcus wat deur die winkel hardloop om vir hulle warm klere te kry. In die huis gaan kyk sy na haarself in die spieël.

Marcus het nie 'n benul hoe gepas die boodskap is nie. *Leef die lewe*. Ja, dis wat sy moet doen. En sy moet dit doen sonder om die hele tyd aan Marcus Dillinger te dink. Veral in die volgende paar dae. Behandel hom soos 'n broer, sê sy vir haarself. Sy moet eenvoudig leer om anders aan Marcus te dink, ophou om so te reageer elke keer as sy by hom is.

Al sê haar hart ook wat.

16



TYLER WAS THRILLED when he heard about the Last Time In program. It was the first time since the shooting that he and Sami felt there was something they could do. Something that might help the kids on the streets. The youth center alone wasn't enough. Tyler agreed with Marcus.

Mary Catherine had presented the idea, and now Sami was on board, too. Tonight, though, Tyler didn't want to think about the prison program or the little boy still fighting for his life at Cedars-Sinai. Even if only for a few hours.

Tonight was the double date with Marcus and Shelly.

Marcus had talked about canceling. He didn't seem as into Shelly as he'd been at the beginning. But Tyler had talked Marcus into sticking with the

plan. Now Marcus and Shelly would meet Tyler and Sami at the restaurant in just a few minutes. Cherry Lane, it was called. A beautiful place situated in the hills above Los Angeles. Tyler walked with Sami through the dining area to a table by the window.

A balcony just off the back gave people a place to admire the view, so after they had their lemon water, Tyler led her outside. He put his arm around her and they looked at the stars. "Reminds me of that night on your grandparents' roof. All those years ago."

"Feels like yesterday." Sami looked into his eyes. "I sort of wish we were having dinner alone. It's been so crazy."

"I know." He took gentle hold of her face and kissed her. "I think Marcus needs tonight."

"With Shelly?" Sami was clearly trying to be nice. But she couldn't hide the disdain in her tone. "I don't get it with them."

Tyler laughed. "No one does. That's why he needs tonight. I have a feeling being around us . . . you know, it'll help him see."

"See what?"

Certainty filled Tyler. "That she's not the right girl."

"I hope so." Sami looked out over the city. "He never looks at Shelly the way he looks at Mary Catherine."

"I wondered about that." Tyler put his arm around her again. "We haven't had time to talk. Feels like weeks." He thought about the two of them, Marcus and Mary Catherine. "Does she like him?"

Sami hesitated. "Everything is complicated with Mary Catherine. She hasn't said, but I can feel it."

"Time will tell." Tyler put his hands on her shoulders and faced her. "You look beautiful. If I haven't told you lately."

"Not since we pulled into the parking lot." She grinned at him. "What if I hadn't found you?"

"What?" He pulled out his most surprised look. "You didn't find me, baby. I found you. Remember? On Facebook."

Sami laughed. "You have a point." She swayed in his arms. "So what if you hadn't written to me? Where would we be?"

Times like this Tyler could easily be overcome with the impossibility of all that had led them to this place. His blown out shoulder, his time being homeless, and then his job as a maintenance worker at Merrill Place. But nothing really turned around until Tyler met Virginia Hutcheson. The fact that her daughter knew Marcus Dillinger and would think to contact him on Tyler's behalf? No one could've seen that coming, or the fact that Sami would break up with her boyfriend after her few hours with Tyler in Florida.

A movie script with everything that had happened would have been tossed in the trash. Too impossible.

Yet God had done it all.

"Which reminds me." Tyler had asked Marcus to be a little late tonight. He had his reasons. "I know it hasn't been long, you and me. We only found each other a few months ago."

"That's not true." Sami linked her hands around the back of Tyler's neck. "We found each other when we were kids."

"True." Tyler loved her more every day. He let himself get lost in her eyes. "I mean, we've only been seeing each other a few months this time around." He caught her face in his hands. "But I want you to know something."

"What?" She grinned. The stars overhead had nothing on the sparkle in her eyes.

"I love you, Sami . . ." His words stacked up in his heart and he couldn't stop himself. "I know you want things between us to go slow. I understand. You and Arnie were serious and . . . well, I don't want to rush you. But . . . I love you. I do." Suddenly he stopped and at the same time he started laughing. "Maybe I could let you talk."

Sami's smile took up her whole face. "I was wondering." She laughed and the sound mixed with the music to become the most beautiful thing Tyler had ever heard. "First . . . I love you, too." Her laughter faded, and her eyes held his. "I've always loved you."

Tyler looked down. Just to make sure he wasn't floating. He turned to her again. She loved him? "Really?"

"Always." She brought her lips to his and kissed him. "Every day I wake up and thank God for bringing you back into my life." She searched his eyes. "I don't want to think about what would've happened if you hadn't written to me."

"Me either." Tyler wanted to raise his fists in the air and shout for joy. But he controlled himself. "So . . . I know you said you needed time . . . you just got out of a relationship. But . . . I can't wait to ask you." He searched her eyes. "Would you be my girlfriend, Sami? I mean, I'd like to ask you to be more than that." He grinned at her. "But first things first."

She dipped her head for a moment, laughing again. When she looked up he saw nothing but absolute assurance in her eyes. "Yes, Tyler. I'd love to be your girlfriend." She hugged him and the two of them swayed some more. She whispered close to his face. "I thought you'd never ask. With you I'm myself. I feel like I can breathe."

"You believed in me when no one else did."

"Always." She put her head on his shoulder. "Don't ever leave me."

“I won’t.” Just then one of their favorite songs came on. James Taylor’s “You’ve Got a Friend.” “Dance with me?”

“Forever.” They waltzed around the deck, and Tyler could picture where this would go. The wonder of it all filled his heart. But then, wonder was part of the process. Choosing to see and believe, to hold on to faith even when nothing made sense. The way he’d felt a year ago. But all of that might as well have been a lifetime away. Someday soon he would ask her grandfather for her hand in marriage. And one day in the not too distant future they would dance like this at their wedding.

Tyler could hardly wait.



MARCUS AND SHELLY were fifteen minutes late to dinner, just like Tyler had asked them to be. They reached the table just as Tyler and Sami were returning from the deck out back.

“Hey, guys!” Marcus hugged Tyler, then Sami. Shelly did the same. “You two look happy.”

“It’s official!” Tyler held Sami’s hand as they sat down. “We’re in love.”

Shelly looked confused. “I thought you two were already . . .”

“It’s a long story.” Tyler laughed. “But it’s all good now.”

Marcus looked from his friends to Shelly. He figured she might need more of an explanation, but she was checking her phone. No longer interested in Sami and Tyler. Marcus hated the way that made him feel about her.

Shelly looked at him. “Sweetie, order me a glass of chardonnay. Whatever the waiter recommends.” She winked at him. “Restroom break.” And with that she left the table and headed for the back of the restaurant.

Marcus watched her go. Was she serious? Shelly was only nineteen. He looked at Tyler and put his elbows on the table. “She’s not twenty-one.”

“I was thinking that.” Tyler made a face to show he empathized with him. “Difficult.”

Sami seemed to be checking the ice in her water. She smiled at Tyler and then Marcus. “How was your coffee with Mary Catherine?”

“Short.” Marcus could feel his heart soften at the mention of her name. “Hey, I’m happy for you two. I know Shelly doesn’t get it. But the two of you, it means a lot. Another piece of the most unbelievable story ever.”

“Thanks, man.” Tyler smiled and slipped his arm around Sami’s shoulders. “How are things with you and Shelly?”

Marcus furrowed his brow. “I’m trying to figure it out, but it’s not really working. I mean . . . just being around you two, it’s kind of obvious. She’s very young.”

The waitress came, and Marcus ordered a Perrier and lime for Shelly. She returned to the table as the drinks were being delivered. Marcus had no idea how she would react. She looked at the drink and then at him. "Tell me this is a Tanqueray and tonic."

"Perrier and lime." He smiled at her. "Come on, Shelly. You're not old enough. No one else is drinking."

"Are you serious?" Shelly rolled her eyes. She was clearly frustrated. "I've been drinking since I was seventeen. You know that."

This was getting awkward. It was as if Shelly didn't remember Tyler and Sami sitting right across from them. "Well. Drinking's not my thing. I think *you* know that."

"Fine." She raised one eyebrow at him. "Your loss. I'm a better date after a few glasses of wine."

"I'll have to settle for sober." Marcus wished he could dig a tunnel beneath the table, usher Shelly back to the car, and take her home. He smiled weakly at her and then at his friends. "Are we ready to order?"

The entire night continued that way, in fits and starts. Shelly never found the social rhythm that his dates usually found. He felt himself counting down the minutes, glad that it was only a dinner date and not an all-day hike. Something he couldn't have gotten out of.

Throughout dinner, Shelly hung on his elbow. She would pat his arm and lean up and kiss his cheek. Already people were looking at their table, the way they sometimes did if they recognized him as the pitcher for the Dodgers. But with Shelly acting this way, they drew even more attention. The kind of attention that didn't seem to have anything to do with his being a baseball player.

Before dinner ended, Shelly looked over her shoulder. "You think the paparazzi might be here? You know, waiting for us outside?" She fixed her hair. "I've always wanted to be in the tabloids!"

Marcus folded his napkin on his plate. That was all. He smiled at Tyler and Sami. "Early morning for me tomorrow. Running stairs again."

"No!" Shelly gasped. Her voice was definitely louder than anyone else's around them. "Not with your injured leg!"

"My leg's fine." Marcus could feel the stares they were getting. "Anyway"—he slid four twenties to Tyler—"this is for the bill. I think we'll get going."

Tyler stood and so did Sami. Another round of hugs and Tyler seemed to try to ease the awkwardness. "I have to be in early, too. Fun dinner, though."

Shelly was still sitting down.

"We're not leaving! Please tell me we're not leaving!" Her voice was

whiny and high-pitched. She wanted to be noticed. There could be no other explanation. So someone would realize who Marcus was and just maybe take their picture.

Marcus felt anger well up inside him. How could he have thought this would be a good time? He clenched his jaw and reached for Shelly's hand. "Come on. I really do have an early day tomorrow."

Thankfully, she stood and slinked up next to him like they were attached at the hip.

"Well, you two lovebirds." Shelly waved her fingers. "It's been real!" She nuzzled Marcus's neck. "Till next time!"

On the way out, Shelly whispered to him, "No one's home at my house. I planned it that way."

Marcus ignored her. Dating Shelly reminded him of every wrong girl he'd ever been with. He felt sick about it. What had he been thinking?

Once they were inside his Hummer, Marcus turned to her. "Shelly."

"Yes, love?" She leaned forward, so her low cut blouse left nothing to the imagination.

Marcus kept his eyes on hers. "Look. Tonight . . . it wasn't good."

She seemed to come to her senses. "What do you mean?"

"Everything." He took a jagged breath. "You seemed really pushy."

"It's a date." She sat back against the passenger door and crossed her arms. "How was I supposed to act?"

Like Mary Catherine, he wanted to say. Instead he found a dose of compassion. "It's fine. Let's just go."

They drove home in silence, and Marcus turned up the radio. Otherwise the silence would've been deafening. He kept his right hand on the wheel so she wouldn't think about trying to hold it. There was no point explaining how he felt. Maybe it wasn't all Shelly's fault. Ever since his walk with Mary Catherine, since her question that night, he found himself wondering the same thing. Who was pursuing whom? And why couldn't he stop comparing Shelly to Mary Catherine?

Marcus walked her up to her front door, but before she could press up against him, he kissed her cheek. "Goodnight, Shelly."

"Are you breaking up with me?" She batted her eyes. She looked sad, but her eyes were dry.

"We aren't in an official relationship. We're just dating." He slipped his hands into his pockets and walked down the stairs. He didn't wait for Shelly's response as he climbed behind the wheel of his SUV and drove off. Only then did he actually feel like he could take a breath. What in the world was he thinking, dating Shelly Wayne? He needed to talk to Coach and explain that

things weren't working with her. And not just because of Shelly's antics.

But because all night long the face that filled his heart and mind wasn't Shelly's.

It was Mary Catherine's.

Hoofstuk 16

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T

Tyler is opgewonde toe hy van die Laaste Keer In-program hoor. Dis die eerste keer sedert die skietery dat hy en Sami voel daar is iets wat hulle kan doen. Iets wat die kinders op straat kan help. Dis duidelik dat die jeugsentrum alleen nie genoeg is nie. Daaroor stem Tyler en Marcus saam.

Mary Catherine het met die idee gekom, en Sami is ook entoesiasies. Maar vanaand wil Tyler nie aan die program dink of aan die klein seuntjie wat in die Cedars-Sinai-hospitaal om sy lewe veg nie. Net vir 'n paar uur.

Vanaand het hy en Sami 'n dubbele afspraak saam met Marcus en Shelly.

Marcus wou kanselleer. Dit is asof hy nie meer so baie van Shelly hou soos in die begin nie. Maar Tyler het hom omgepraat om by die oorspronklike plan te bly. Marcus en Shelly gaan Tyler en Sami oor 'n paar minute by die restaurant kry. Cherry Lane noem hulle dit. 'n Pragtige klein plekkie in die heuwels bokant Los Angeles. Tyler loop saam met Sami na 'n tafel by die venster.

Daar is 'n balkon vanwaar 'n mens die uitsig kan bewonder, en nadat hulle suurlemoenwater gedrink het, gaan hulle daar staan. Tyler sit sy arm om haar en hulle kyk op na die sterre. 'Dit laat my dink aan daardie aand op jou grootouers se dak. Jare gelede.'

'Dit voel soos gister.' Sami kyk in sy oë. 'Ek wens eintlik ons kon alleen gewees het. Dit was so 'n vreeslike tyd, die afgelope paar dae.'

'Ek weet.' Hy hou haar gesig saggies vas en soen haar. 'Ek dink Marcus het vanaand nodig.'

'Saam met Shelly?' Dis duidelik dat Sami hard probeer om gaaf te wees. Maar sy kan nie haar afkeer wegsteek nie. 'Ek verstaan nie wat hy in haar sien nie.'

Tyler lag. 'Niemand verstaan dit nie. Dis waarom hy vanaand nodig het. Ek dink as hy by ons is ... jy weet, dit sal hom help om te sien.'

'Wat te sien?'

Tyler voel skielik seker. 'Dat sy nie die regte meisie vir hom is nie.'

‘Ek hoop so.’ Sami kyk uit oor die stad. ‘Hy kyk nooit na Shelly soos hy na Mary Catherine kyk nie.’

‘Ek het daaroor gewonder.’ Tyler sit weer sy arms om haar. ‘Ons het lanklaas tyd gehad om te praat. Voel soos weke.’ Hy dink aan die twee van hulle, Marcus en Mary Catherine. ‘Hou sy van hom?’

Sami bly stil. ‘Mary Catherine se lewe is ingewikkeld. Sy het niks gesê nie, maar ek kan dit aanvoel.’

‘Wel, die tyd sal leer.’ Tyler sit sy hande op haar skouers en draai haar na hom toe. ‘Jy is pragtig. Net ingeval ek jou nie onlangs gesê het nie.’

‘Nie vandat ons in die parkeerarea was nie.’ Sy glimlag vir hom. ‘Sê nou ek het jou nie gekry nie?’

‘Wat?’ Hy plak ’n uitdrukking van stomme verbasing op sy gesig. ‘Jy het my nie gekry nie, liefing, ek het jou gekry. Onthou jy? Op Facebook.’

Sami lag. ‘Jy het ’n punt beet.’ Sy wieg in sy arms. ‘Wel, sê nou jy het nie geskryf nie. Waar sou ons nou wees?’

In oomblikke soos hierdie voel Tyler oorweldig deur die onmoontlikheid van wat hulle tot hier gebring het. Hy wat sy skouer beseer het, haweloos was, en toe by die versorgingsoord werk gekry het. Maar niks het regtig verander voordat hy Virginia Hutcheson ontmoet het nie. Die feit dat haar dogter Marcus Dillinger ken en daaraan gedink het om om Tyler se onthalwe met hom in aanraking te kom? Niemand kon dit uitgedink het nie, of dat Sami na net ’n paar uur saam met Tyler in Florida haar verhouding met ’n ander man sou verbreek nie.

’n Draaiboek met so ’n verhaal sou verseker in die snippermandjie beland het. Te onmoontlik.

Maar die Here het dit alles bewerkstellig.

‘Wat my aan iets laat dink.’ Tyler het Marcus gevra om eers ’n bietjie later te kom. Hy het sy redes. ‘Ek weet ons is nog nie lank saam nie, ek en jy. Ons het mekaar skaars ’n paar maande gelede leer ken.’

‘Is nie.’ Sami sit haar hande om Tyler se nek. ‘Ons het mekaar leer ken toe ons kinders was.’

‘Dis waar.’ Tyler word elke dag liewer vir haar. Hy raak verlore in haar oë. ‘Ek bedoel, hierdie keer is ons nog net ’n paar maande saam.’ Hy hou haar gesig tussen sy hande vas. ‘Maar ek wil vir jou iets sê.’

‘Ja?’ sy glimlag. Die sterre kom nie naby die vonkel in haar oë nie.

‘Ek is lief vir jou, Sami ...’ Die woorde kom uit sy hart getuimel; hy kan dit nie keer nie. ‘Ek weet jy wil hê ons moet stadig oor die klippe. Ek verstaan. Jy en Arnie het ’n ernstige verhouding gehad en ... wel, ek wil jou nie oordonder nie. Maar ... ek is lief vir jou. Regtig.’ Hy bly skielik stil, en begin dan lag. ‘Miskien moet ek jou ’n kans gee om iets te sê.’

Sami se gesig is een groot glimlag. ‘Ek het gewonder of ek ’n kans gaan kry.’ Sy lag en saam met die musiek uit die restaurant is dit die mooiste geluid wat Tyler nog gehoor het. ‘Eerstens ... ek is lief vir jou ook.’ Haar lag word stil, en haar oë hou syne gevange. ‘Ek was nog altyd lief vir jou.’

Tyler kyk af. Net om seker te maak hy sweef nie. Hy kyk weer na haar. Sy is lief vir hom? Sowaar? ‘Sowaar?’

‘Nog altyd.’ Sy lig haar kop op en soen hom. ‘Elke oggend as ek wakker word, dank ek die Here dat Hy jou weer in my lewe gebring het.’ Sy soek in sy oë. ‘Ek wil nie eens dink aan wat kon gebeur het as jy nie vir my geskryf het nie.’

‘Ek ook nie.’ Tyler wil sy arms in die lug gooi en van vreugde uitroep. Maar hy bly stellig staan. ‘So ... ek weet jy kom nou net uit ’n verhouding uit. Maar ... ek kan nie langer wag nie.’ Hy soek weer in haar oë. ‘Sal jy my meisie wees, Sami? Ek bedoel, ek wil eintlik meer vra.’ Hy glimlag vir haar. ‘Maar kom ons begin by die begin.’

Sy laat haar kop vir ’n oomblik sak. Sy lag weer. Toe sy opkyk, sien hy net absolute sekerheid in haar oë. ‘Ja, Tyler. Dit sal lekker wees om jou meisie te wees.’ Sy sit haar arms om hom en hulle staan lank so. Sy fluister naby aan sy gesig. ‘Ek het gedink jy gaan nooit vra nie. By jou voel ek soos myself. Ek voel asof ek kan asemhaal.’

‘Jy het in my geglo toe niemand anders dit gedoen het nie.’

‘Nog altyd.’ Sy sit haar kop op sy skouer. ‘Moet my net nie verlaat nie.’

‘Ek sal nie.’ Hy hoor een van hul geliefkoosde liedere. James Taylor se ‘You’ve got a friend’. ‘Sal ons dans?’

‘Vir seker.’ Hulle wals op die balkon, en Tyler sien die toekoms voor hom. Een van die dae gaan hy haar oupa vra of hy met haar kan trou. En een van die dae, nie te ver in die toekoms nie, gaan hulle so op hul troue dans.

Tyler kan nie wag nie.

~

Marcus en Shelly is laat, maar Marcus weet dat Tyler nie sal omgee nie. Hulle kom by die tafel aan net toe Tyler en Sami van die balkon af terugkom.

‘Haai, julle!’ Marcus sit sy arms om Tyler se skouers, en gee Sami ’n drukkie. Shelly deel ook drukkie uit. ‘Julle twee lyk gelukkig.’

‘Dis amptelik!’ Tyler hou Sami se hand vas toe hulle gaan sit. ‘Ons is verlief.’ Shelly lyk verward. ‘Ek het gedink julle is lankal ...’

‘Lang storie!’ Tyler lag. ‘Maar alles is nou uitgesorteer.’

Marcus kyk van sy vriende na Shelly. Hy wil vir haar verduidelik, maar sien sy is besig op haar selfoon. Nie meer in Tyler en Sami geïnteresseerd nie. Marcus hou nie van die gevoelens wat dit by hom opwek nie.

Shelly kyk na hom. 'Liefie, bestel vir my 'n glas chardonnay. Wat die kelner ook al aanbeveel.' Sy knipoog vir hom. 'Kleedkamer-tyd.'

Hier is 'n probleem. Shelly is negentien, onder die ouderdom waarop sy alkohol mag bestel. Marcus kyk na Tyler en sit sy elmboë op die tafel. 'Sy is nog nie een-en-twintig nie.'

'Ek weet.' Tyler trek 'n gesig om te wys hy het simpatie met sy vriend. 'Moeilik.'

Dit lyk asof Sami die ys in haar water ondersoek. Sy glimlag eers vir Tyler en toe vir Marcus.

'Hoe was jou koffie-afspraak met Mary Catherine?'

'Kort.' Marcus voel hoe sy hart versag toe hy haar naam hoor. 'Haai, ek is bly vir julle part. Ek weet Shelly verstaan dit nie. Maar dit is 'n belangrike oomblik. Nog 'n stukkie van die ongelooflikste verhaal nog.'

'Dankie.' Tyler glimlag en sit sy arm om Sami se skouers. 'Hoe gaan dinge met jou en Shelly?'

Marcus frons. 'Ek probeer dit uitsorteer – dit werk nie regtig nie. Ek bedoel ... as ek net na julle kyk, is dit mos duidelik. Sy is nog baie jonk.'

Die kelner verskyn, en Marcus bestel Perrier en lemmetjie vir Shelly. Sy kom saam met die drankies by die tafel aan. Marcus weet nie hoe sy sal reageer nie. Sy kyk na die glas en dan na hom. 'Sê vir my dit is gin en tonic.'

'Perrier en lemmetjie.' Hy glimlag vir haar. 'Komaan, Shelly. Jy is nie oud genoeg nie. Niemand anders by die tafel drink nie.'

'Jy is nie ernstig nie.' Shelly slaan haar oë hemelwaarts. Dit is duidelik dat sy gefrustreerd is. 'Ek drink al van ek sewentien is. Jy weet dit tog.'

Marcus voel verleë. Dit is asof Shelly vergeet het Tyler en Sami sit regoor hulle. 'Wel, ek drink nie. Jy weet dit tog.'

'Goed dan.' Sy lig haar een wenkbrou. 'Dis jou verlies. Ek is beter geselskap na 'n paar glase wyn.'

'Ek sal maar tevrede moet wees met jou nugter.' Marcus wens hy kan 'n tunnel onder die tafel grawe tot by hul motor en Shelly terugneem huis toe. 'Is ons reg om te bestel?'

Soos die aand begin het, gaan dit aan. Met rukke en stote. Dis asof Shelly nie die sosiale ritme kan kry waaraan hy gewoond is by die meisies wat hy uitneem nie. Marcus tel later die minute, bly dat hulle net vir die aand uit is en nie die hele dag in die veld was nie. Want daaruit sou hy nie vinnig kon kom nie.

Shelly hang die hele tyd aan sy arm. Elke nou en dan soen sy sy wang. Die mense by die ander tafels staar hulle aan, iets wat dikwels gebeur wanneer mense hom herken as die Dodgers se gooier. Maar Shelly se gedrag maak dat hul tafel meer aandag as gewoonlik trek. Die soort aandag wat niks te doen

het met sy vermoëns as bofbalspeler nie.

Nog voordat die ete verby is, kyk Shelly oor haar skouer. 'Dink julle die paparazzi is hier buite? Dink julle hulle wag dat ons uitkom?' Sy stoot haar hare reg. 'Ek wou nog altyd in die Sondagkoerant wees!'

Marcus vou sy servet op en sit dit op sy bord neer. Genoeg is genoeg. Hy glimlag vir Tyler en Sami. 'Ek moet môreoggend vroeg uit die vere wees. Die stadion se trappies wag.'

'Nee!' snak Shelly. Haar stem is harder as dié van die ander gaste. 'Nie met jou beseerde been nie!'

'My been makeer niks.' Marcus voel hoe die mense hom aanstaar. 'In elk geval.' Hy stoot 'n paar note na Tyler se kant toe. 'Vir die rekening. Ons is op pad.'

Tyler en Sami staan op. Nog 'n rondte drukkie; Tyler probeer die atmosfeer lig. 'Ek moet ook vroeg in die bed kom. Dit was 'n lekker aand!'

Shelly sit waar sy sit.

'Ons gaan nie nou al nie. Moenie sê ons is op pad nie!' Haar stem is klaerig en hoog. Sy wil raakgesien word. Daar kan nie 'n ander verklaring wees nie. Sy wil hê iemand moet besef wie Marcus is en miskien 'n foto neem.

Marcus voel hoe hy kwaad word. Hoe kon hy gedink het dit is lekker om saam met Shelly uit te gaan? Hy kners op sy tande en neem Shelly se hand. 'Kom. Ek moet regtig môre vroeg opstaan.'

Geluklik staan sy hierdie keer op en kom stap langs hom asof sy aan sy heup vasgegroeï is.

'Wel, julle twee duifies.' Shelly waai haar vingers. 'Dit was lekker.' Sy snuffel in Marcus se nek. 'Tot volgende keer!'

Op pad uit fluister sy vir hom: 'Daar is niemand by die huis nie. Ek het dit so beplan.'

Marcus ignoreer haar. Om met Shelly uit te gaan laat hom dink aan elke verkeerde meisie met wie hy al uitgegaan het. Dit laat hom siek voel. Wat het hy gedink?

In sy Hummer draai hy na haar toe. 'Shelly.'

'Ja, liefing?' Sy leun vorentoe, en haar bloes is so laag gesny dat niks aan sy verbeelding oorgelaat word nie.

Marcus hou sy oë op haar gesig. 'Vanaand. Dit het nie gewerk nie.'

Dis asof sy tot haar sinne kom. 'Wat bedoel jy?'

'Alles.' Hy haal rukkerig asem. 'Jy was regtig opdringerig.'

'Wel, ons was bymekaar.' Sy sit teen die motor se deur en vou haar arms. 'Wat is ek veronderstel om te doen?'

Maak soos Mary Catherine, wil hy sê. Maar hy kry dit reg om haar jammer te kry. 'Toemaar. Kom ons los dit. Kom ons ry.'

Hulle ry in stilte, en Marcus sit die radio aan. Anders sou die stilte gedawer het. Hy hou sy hande op die stuurwiel sodat sy nie moet dink hy wil haar hand vashou nie. Dit help nie om te probeer verduidelik nie. Miskien is dit nie alles haar skuld nie. Vandat hy saam met Mary Catherine gaan stap het, van haar vraag daardie aand, wonder hy ál oor een ding. Wie jaag vir wie? En waarom kan hy nie ophou om Shelly met Mary Catherine te vergelyk nie?

Marcus stap saam met Shelly tot by die voordeur, maar voordat sy haar teen hom kan vasdruk, soen hy haar wang. ‘Totsiens, Shelly.’

‘Is jy besig om dit uit te maak met my?’ Sy fladder haar ooglede. Sy lyk hartseer, maar haar oë is droog.

‘Wel, ons het mos nie amptelik uitgegaan nie. Ons het mekaar net dikwels gesien.’ Hy sit sy hande in sy sakke en loop met die trappies af. Hy wag nie vir Shelly se antwoord nie, maar klim agter die stuurwiel in en ry weg. Eers toe voel dit asof hy weer kan asemhaal. Wat op aarde het hom besiel om met Shelly uit te gaan? Hy moet nou met sy afrigter gaan praat en verduidelik dat dinge nie uitgewerk het tussen hom en Shelly nie. En nie net oor die dinge wat Shelly aanvang nie.

Omdat die gesig wat sy gedagtes en wese die hele aand gevul het, nie Shelly s’n was nie.

Dit was Mary Catherine s’n.

17



MARY CATHERINE MET MARCUS in the parking lot of the police station around noon the next day. Despite all her determination to see Marcus in a different light, to remember the way he looked with Shelly fawning over him, she couldn’t get her heart in line.

From the moment he walked up to her she felt the heat in her cheeks. Felt her heart beating faster than before. The faint smell of his cologne made her breathless. *Come on, Mary Catherine.* She swallowed, desperate for a grip. “I have no idea what to expect.” Her voice sounded shaky. She looked up at him as they reached the door of the station. She needed to keep her mind on the matter at hand. Learning how to work with the girls during their prison visit.

“Can I say something? Before we go in.” Marcus stopped and smiled at

her. "You look beautiful. Just didn't think I should miss the chance to say so."

She held her breath for a few seconds. "Thank you." Her rebellious heart soared at his compliment. He looked great, too. Dark blue jeans and a white short-sleeve shirt. But Mary Catherine didn't dare say so.

Even being attracted to him was wrong. He had a girlfriend, and she had promised God she wasn't going to date. Not ever. But then why did she feel like this? And why was Marcus making things more difficult by being so kind?

"I heard about your date last night." Mary Catherine started walking again. She shot him a teasing look. "Sounds like a good time."

Sami had spilled all the details back at the apartment last night. About Shelly's request for wine and the way she clung to Marcus throughout the night. Sami had said Marcus couldn't get out of the restaurant fast enough.

Now Marcus rubbed the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "She's a lot of work, for sure."

"Well . . ." Mary Catherine grinned, enjoying the game. As long as she could joke with him, she wouldn't have to worry about why it sometimes seemed he felt attracted to her, too. She tilted her head, as if she were genuinely concerned about Shelly and him. "I'm sure you two will figure things out."

Marcus opened the door for her and they walked inside. At first he looked like he might disagree about figuring things out with Shelly, but before he could speak, Charlie Kent approached them. "Marcus. Mary Catherine." He held out his hand. "Great to see you both!"

"Thanks." Marcus took the lead. "Our friends will be here, too. Sami Dawson and Tyler Ames."

"Great. I'm expecting them." He checked a clipboard on the nearest table. He scanned the page. "It looks like we have six young ladies going through the program and a dozen volunteers. Those are the numbers we like."

"We won't meet the girls tonight, right?" Mary Catherine hadn't been sure about that.

"No." Officer Kent smiled. "They're back at home. Once they agreed to the program, we released them from jail." He frowned. "Jail and prison are very different. These girls haven't seen the inside of a prison. This will be an awakening for sure."

Sami and Tyler arrived and together with the other volunteers they were ushered into a classroom. Officer Kent led the training. "These kids are hard and angry and defeated. The only reason they agreed to this program is it beats serving time. They won't change easily. That's important to know."

Mary Catherine pulled her notebook from her purse and scribbled down

everything the officer said. Marcus sat next to her and every once in a while their arms brushed against each other. Mary Catherine discreetly moved her chair a few inches away.

His touch was more than she could take.

Charlie Kent continued, explaining another reality for these girls. “Girls around this age, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen . . . they’ve most likely been sexually abused; many have been raped. More than once for some of them.” He leveled his gaze at them. “You feel good about yourself if you feed a teenager a healthy meal? Parents of these girls feel good if a teenager doesn’t get raped under their roof.” He paused. “They come from broken homes. There’s no supervision much of the time.”

He told a story where he was talking to the stepmother of a girl who had gone through the program a few years ago. “She told me she couldn’t understand why her daughter didn’t want to be at home. She said, ‘She’s been raped by her uncles and cousins. But never at my house. You’d think that would matter to a kid.’ ”

Mary Catherine couldn’t decide if she felt angry or just nauseous.

Dear God, what difference can we make with these girls? What’s the point? She thought about the faces on her refrigerator, the kids from Africa she sponsored each month. *I’d be better off going to their village. Building them a home and providing them food and love,* she thought. Things were too far gone here.

“You okay?” Marcus whispered to her. He studied her eyes. “This is tough.”

“It is.” She smiled. Why was he so kind to her? “I didn’t know . . . it was so bad.”

“Me either.” He looked sad. “Glad I’m here.”

She nodded.

Charlie Kent explained that another problem was the girls’ dishonesty. “They lie about everything. Just to feel like they have power. They don’t want to share the truth and you can’t force them to. Truth makes them feel vulnerable. Remember that when you get to the group-share part of the program. They have to talk a long time before the walls fall enough for them to be honest.”

Great. Mary Catherine wrote the word *liar* in her notebook. The girls had been raped and used and sucked into gang activity. They were hard and callused and they wouldn’t tell the truth for a long time, if ever.

So what was the point?

The training went on for another hour. They talked about the EastTown Boyz and the WestKnights, how the gangs formed, what their purposes were,

and how easily the younger kids got drawn into joining.

“It’s all these kids know.” Officer Kent folded his arms. “Mom was a WestKnight, Dad was a WestKnight, brother and sister were WestKnights. A kid turns twelve, there’s no question about what his future holds. He’ll be a WestKnight. Unless someone shoots him first.”

Mary Catherine tried to table her discouragement. The training was important. They learned that the EastTown Boyz mainly dealt heroin. WestKnights dealt cocaine. Heroin wasn’t as costly as cocaine but the customers were more desperate.

“For the most part kids in gangs don’t do the heavy drugs, they deal them. They smoke pot and they drink. But the hard drugs are business to them. They get them from the Mexican cartels and entrepreneur street dealers. It’s how gangs stay afloat financially.”

When the training was over, the volunteers each collected a booklet of additional information from Officer Kent. “Read through this. Tomorrow we’ll talk about prison life. You need to know what to expect. After a week or so we’ll give you materials for your group sessions. How to transition these girls from gangs to getting an education and even a job. Practical ways they can find a life outside of what they’ve known.”

Officer Kent also gave each pair of volunteers the name of the girl they’d be working with and her contact information. “We encourage you to reach out before the prison visit Saturday. You can call or text. Just some way so they know you’re there for them. You care. Whether they believe that at first or not.”

Back outside in the parking lot, Mary Catherine and Marcus met up with Tyler and Sami. All of them looked drained. “That was a lot.” Sami linked arms with Tyler. “I didn’t feel ready for this before. But I feel way worse now. How can I help a girl who’s gone through all that?”

“Who’d you get?” Tyler looked from Mary Catherine to Marcus.

“Lexy Jones.” Marcus looked at the information card on the girl. “I think Officer Jag arranged that.”

Mention of the man’s name reminded Mary Catherine she hadn’t talked to Charlie Kent about Jag. Where exactly did he work, and how was he connected to the local department? She turned to Sami. “What about y’all?”

“I love when you say *y’all*.” Tyler smiled at her. “Just for the record.”

Mary Catherine returned the smile.

“We know, we know.” Sami laughed. “It’s that Southern thing.”

“Exactly.” She grinned. “I can’t help it if y’all weren’t raised right.”

“About our girl.” Tyler looked intently at the information card he and Sami had been given. “Her name is Alicia. She’s fourteen. Arrested for grand theft

auto and truancy.”

“Looks like we’ve got the rougher of the two.” Marcus made a face that said how serious things were for Lexy. “Our girl’s connected to one of the most brutal killers on the street.”

“Again . . . how are we supposed to help?” Sami looked lost, like she wasn’t sure she could go through with it.

“I think this is where faith comes in.” Tyler sighed. “I mean, none of us is prepared, but we’re willing. I guess we ask God to make up the difference.”

“He’s right.” Marcus put his hands in his pockets. “Maybe we could do that now?”

“I like it.” Tyler gave Marcus a friendly slap on the arm. “You always have the best ideas, man.”

The group huddled up, their arms around each other’s shoulders. Mary Catherine was between Sami and Marcus, but all she could feel was the way Marcus’s arms felt around her. Strong and warm and secure. She had her arm around his waist. Nothing in all her life had felt so natural and wonderful.

So real.

God, help me . . . I can’t stop these feelings. Mary Catherine closed her eyes, tried everything possible not to think about Marcus beside her. *See, God? Nothing works. I can never have this except in random moments. Marcus will never be mine. So please . . . help me keep my distance. Help me keep my wayward heart in line.*

Tyler started the prayer and Mary Catherine did everything she could to focus. Tyler asked God to give them supernatural wisdom and protection, that their efforts might truly change the lives of the girls in the program. Mary Catherine listened and prayed along with Tyler, but she found herself wishing the prayer would go on forever.

When it was finished, and after Tyler and Sami headed for his car, Marcus gave her shoulders a light squeeze. His smile warmed her all the way through. Mary Catherine drew a long breath. “Well . . . I think I’ll go visit Lexy. Take her to Elysian Park for a hike. She doesn’t know me, so she might not want to go. But I want to try.”

“Good idea.” Marcus’s eyes lit up at the idea. “I’ll go with you. I was sort of thinking the same thing.”

“Well . . .” Mary Catherine shook her head. “Maybe not this time.” She willed him to understand. “Sometimes girls open up better to a girl. At least at first.”

Marcus thought about that. “Okay. I guess.” He seemed disappointed. “I really would like to meet her before we see her Saturday morning.”

“Maybe tomorrow.” Mary Catherine folded her arms in front of her.

“Thanks for being so kind. And for doing this. It doesn’t seem like it, but I have to believe it’ll help.”

“It has to.” He put his hand on her shoulder, but she was already pulling away.

She waved. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

He chuckled. “You’re always in a hurry.”

“I guess.” Mary Catherine gave him her best smile. So he wouldn’t know how she was really feeling. “I’ve always got somewhere to be.” She turned for her car. “See you tomorrow!”

“See you.”

Mary Catherine watched him in her rearview mirror. He stood there, watching her until she drove away. Only then did the tears sting at her eyes. She blinked them back. It was nothing to cry over. She would never have Marcus Dillinger. “Come on, MC.” She wiped her cheeks. “Get over it. You’re stronger than that.”

She had no choice, really. Her heart would figure it out eventually.

A few blocks down the road, she pulled over and used the number on Lexy’s information card to text her. *Hey. It’s Mary Catherine. I’m the volunteer who’ll be helping you this weekend. I wondered if I could come by and take you for a walk. Maybe get coffee.*

Lexy must’ve had her phone with her, because she was quick to respond. *No coffee.*

“Okay.” Mary Catherine tried to think of what to say next. Her fingers worked their way over the small keyboard. *A milkshake, maybe?*

The response took a little longer this time. *Fine. I can’t be out late.*

Lexy’s answer made her smile. The girl was clearly guilty of far more than staying out late. But like Officer Kent said, these kids would lie. They didn’t trust anyone. Least of all some stranger. Still, Mary Catherine felt a glimmer of hope. Lexy was willing. Before she pulled away she texted Shamika. *How’s Jalen? The two of you have been on my mind all day.*

Shamika texted back quickly. *The same. His doctors say the longer he’s in a coma, the worse it is. Please pray.*

I am. I will. Just like that Mary Catherine had plans for both day and night. She tapped out another text. *I’ll come up and visit after dinner.*

Thank you. Shamika included a praying hands emoji. *Sometimes I like to sit here alone with him, because that’s most like usual for us. Just him and me. But other times I feel like I’ll go crazy if I don’t have someone to talk to. I’ll see you tonight.*

Mary Catherine appreciated the joy that filled her heart and mind as she drove away. She didn’t need Marcus to feel happy about what God was doing

in her life. Didn't need his arm around her shoulders or his kind eyes looking into hers. Days like today it was enough to simply carry out the message on the sweatshirt he'd given her. *Live life.*

With God's help, that's exactly what she planned to do.

Hoofstuk 17

~

M

ary Catherine kry Marcus die volgende dag in die parkeerarea van die polisiestasie. Ten spyte van haar voorneme om Marcus as 'n broer te beskou, om te onthou hoe hy gelyk het toe Shelly oor hom gekoer het, kry sy nie haar hart onder bedwang nie.

Sy kan voel hoe haar wange begin gloei die oomblik toe hy nader staan. Hoe haar hart vinniger klop. Die vae reuk van sy naskeermiddel slaan haar asem weg. *Komaan, Mary Catherine!* Sy sluk. Sy moet haar regruk. 'Ek weet glad nie wat om te verwag nie.' Sy kyk na hom toe hulle by die deur kom. Sy moet op die program, die opleiding, fokus. Sy moet vasstel wat sy moet doen wanneer hulle die toer deur die tronk doen.

'Kan ek iets sê? Voor ons ingaan.' Marcus staan stil en glimlag vir haar. 'Jy lyk pragtig. En ek wil nie die kans om dit te sê laat verbygaan nie.'

Sy hou vir twee sekondes lank op om asem te haal. Haar verraderlike hart sweef by die aanhoor van die kompliment. Hy lyk ook wonderlik. Donker jeans en 'n wit kortmouhemp. Maar Mary Catherine waag dit nie om dit te sê nie.

Dit is verkeerd om selfs net aangetrokke tot hom te voel. Hy het 'n meisie, en sy het God beloof dat sy nie met ouens sal uitgaan nie. Nooit nie. Maar waarom voel sy dan soos sy voel? En waarom maak Marcus dit so moeilik vir haar deur so gaaf te wees?

'Ek het gehoor van jul ete gisteraand.' Mary Catherine begin weer aanstap. Sy kyk teregend na hom. 'Dit klink asof jy en jou meisie dit geniet het.'

Sami het haar alles vertel toe sy by die huis kom. Shelly se voorneme om wyn te drink en hoe sy aan Marcus gehang het. Sami het gesê Marcus kon nie gou genoeg uit die restaurant kom nie.

Marcus vryf oor sy neusbrug en skud sy kop. 'Sy is harde werk, dis seker.'

'Wel.' Mary Catherine glimlag. Sy geniet die speletjie. So lank as wat sy kan grappies maak, hoef sy haar nie te bekommer daaroor dat dit soms lyk asof hy

ook tot haar aangetrokke voel nie. Sy hou haar kop skeep, asof sy regtig bekommerd is oor hom en Shelly. 'Ek is seker julle sal iets kan uitwerk.'

Marcus maak die deur vir haar oop en hulle stap in. Dit lyk asof hy van haar wil verskil, maar voordat hy iets kan sê, kom Charlie Kent aangestap. 'Marcus. Mary Catherine.' Hy steek sy hand uit. 'Dis lekker om julle te sien.' 'Dankie.' Marcus neem leiding. 'Ons vriende is op pad. Sami Dawson en Tyler Ames.'

'Reg, ek verwag hulle.' Hy kyk na die knipbord op die naaste tafel, en lees deur die lys name. 'Dit lyk asof daar ses jong dames gaan wees wat die program gaan doen, en ongeveer 'n dosyn vrywilligers. 'n Goeie getal.'

'Ons gaan nie vanaand al die meisies ontmoet nie, of hoe?' Mary Catherine was nie seker daaroor nie.

'Nee.' Offisier Kent glimlag. 'Hulle is by die huis. Toe hulle ingestem het om die program te doen, het ons hulle vrygelaat.' Hy frons. 'Daar is 'n groot verskil tussen aanhouding en tronkstraf. Hierdie meisies het nog nie die binnekant van 'n regte tronk gesien nie. Dit sal beslis 'n wrede ontnugtering wees.'

Sami en Tyler maak hul verskyning en hulle en die ander vrywilligers gaan na 'n lokaal daar naby. Offisier Kent sal hulle oplei. 'Hierdie kinders is hard en kwaad en sonder hoop. Die enigste rede waarom hulle instem om die program te doen, is omdat dit beter is as om aangehou te word. Hulle sal nie maklik verander nie. Dis belangrik dat julle dit weet.'

Mary Catherine haal 'n notaboek uit haar handsak en skryf alles neer wat die offisier sê. Marcus sit langs haar; elke nou en dan raak hul arms aan mekaar. Mary Catherine skuif haar stoel stilletjies 'n entjie weg.

Sy aanraking is meer as wat sy kan verduur.

Charlie Kent verduidelik 'n verdere realiteit omtrent die meisies se lewens. 'Meisies van hulle ouderdom, tussen dertien en vyftien, is waarskynlik al seksueel gemolesteer, en baie is al verkrag. Party meer as een keer.' Hy kyk hulle reguit aan. 'Voel julle julle doen goed as julle 'n tiener 'n gesonde bord kos gee? Die ouers van hierdie meisies voel hulle vaar goed as hulle tieners nie onder hul eie dak verkrag word nie.' Hy bly stil. 'Hulle bly meestal by een ouer of grootouer. Daar is die meeste van die tyd geen toesig nie.'

Hy vertel van 'n gesprek met 'n stiefma van 'n meisie wat 'n paar jaar gelede die program deurloop het. 'Sy het gesê sy kan nie verstaan hoekom die meisie nie by die huis wil wees nie. Haar woorde was: "Haar oom en haar neefs het haar verkrag. Maar nooit by my huis nie. Jy sou dink dit sal haar wil laat tuisbly."'

Mary Catherine weet nie of sy kwaad of naar is nie.

Liewe Here, kan ons ooit 'n verskil aan hierdie meisies maak? Wat is die punt

van ons programmetjie? Sy dink aan die gesiggies op haar yskas, die kinders in Afrika wat sy elke maand borg. *Dit sal beter wees om na hulle toe te gaan. Vir hulle 'n huis te gaan bou en kos en liefde vir hulle te gee,* dink sy. Hierdie situasie is al te hopeloos.

‘Is alles reg?’ fluister Marcus. Hy kyk aandagtig na haar. ‘Hierdie ding is moeilik.’

‘Ja.’ Sy glimlag. Waarom is hy so gaaf? ‘Ek het nie geweet dit is ... so erg nie.’

‘Ek ook nie.’ Hy lyk hartseer. ‘Ek is bly ek is hier.’

Sy knik.

Charlie Kent verduidelik dat die meisies se oneerlikheid ook ’n groot probleem is. ‘Hulle lieg oor alles. Net om te voel dat hulle darem iewers in beheer is. Hulle wil nie die waarheid openbaar nie, en jy kan hulle nie dwing om dit te doen nie. Die waarheid laat hulle kwesbaar voel. Onthou dit wanneer julle by die deel-met-mekaar-sessies kom. Hulle sal baie tyd saam met julle moet deurbring voordat die skanse begin val en hulle eerlik kan wees.’

Dit maak sin. Mary Catherine skryf die woord ‘leuens’ in haar notaboek. Dis meisies wat verkrag is en misbruik is en in die bendes ingesuij is. Hulle het ’n harde dop ontwikkel en hulle sal vir ’n lang tyd nie die waarheid praat nie, miskien nooit.

Dus: Wat is die punt?

Die opleiding duur ongeveer ’n uur. Hulle praat oor die twee bendes, die EastTown Boyz en die WestKnights, hoe die bendes ontstaan het, wat hulle doelwitte is, en hoe maklik die jonger kinders ingesuij word.

‘Hierdie kinders.’ Offisier Kent vou sy arms. ‘Ma was in die WestKnights, pa was, broer en suster is in die WestKnights. As ’n kind twaalf jaar oud word, is daar geen twyfel wat die toekoms inhou nie. Hy sal ook ’n WestKnight word. Tensy iemand hom skiet.’

Mary Catherine probeer om haar moedeloosheid weg te steek. Die opleiding is belangrik. Hulle hoor dat die EastTown Boyz hoofsaaklik in heroïen handel dryf, die WestKnights in kokaïen. Heroïen is nie so duur soos kokaïen nie, maar die kopers is meer desperaat.

Die bendelede is gewoonlik nie self gebruikers nie. Hulle verkoop net die dwelms. Hulle rook dagga en drink, maar die harde dwelms is niks anders as inkomste nie. Hulle kry dit van ’n Meksikaanse sindikaat en ook van entrepreneurs wat op straat handel dryf. Dit is hoe die bendes finansiële oorleef.

Na die opleiding kry die vrywilligers elkeen ’n pamflet met bykomende inligting. ‘Lees dit. Môre sal ons oor die lewe in die tronk gesels. Julle moet

weet wat om te verwag. Na 'n week of so sal ons vir julle materiaal gee vir die groepsessies. Hoe om hierdie meisies die oorgang te laat maak van bendes na iets anders, miskien skool of verdere opleiding, selfs 'n werk. Praktiese maniere hoe hulle 'n lewe kan maak buite die bekende lewe in die bende.'

Offisier Kent gee ook vir elke paar vrywilligers die naam van die meisie met wie hulle gaan saamwerk, en haar kontakbesonderhede. 'Ons wil julle aanmoedig om nog voor die tronkbesoek na hulle uit te reik. Julle kan bel of 'n SMS stuur. Probeer net oordra dat julle daar is vir hulle. Dat julle omgee. Of hulle dit glo of nie.'

Buitekant in die parkeerarea gesels Mary Catherine en Marcus met Tyler en Sami. Almal lyk gedreineer. 'Dit was baie om in te neem.' Sami en Tyler staan ingehaak. 'Voor die sessie het ek gewonder of ek gereed is hiervoor. Maar nou voel ek nog minder gereed. Hoe kan ek 'n meisie help wat al soveel dinge moes deurmaak?'

'Watter meisie het julle gekry?' Tyler kyk na Marcus en Mary Catherine.

'Lexy Jones.' Marcus kyk na die inligtingskaartjie in sy hand. 'Ek dink offisier Jag het dit bewerkstellig.'

Toe hy die naam noem, onthou Mary Catherine dat sy met Charlie Kent oor hom wou praat. Waar werk hy presies, en wat is sy verbintenis met die plaaslike polisiestasie? Sy draai na Sami. 'En wat van julle twee?'

Haar suidelike aksent slaan skielik deur, en Tyler glimlag. 'Ek hou daarvan as dit gebeur. Net sodat jy weet.'

Mary Catherine glimlag terug.

'Ons weet, ons weet,' lag Sami. 'Jy's reg groot gemaak.'

'Presies.' Sy lag saggies. 'Ek kan nie help dat jul opvoeding soveel leemtes het nie.'

'Ons meisie.' Tyler is weer ernstig, en hy kyk met groot konsentrasie na die inligting op sy kaartjie. 'Haar naam is Alicia, en sy is veertien. Sy is gearresteer vir motordiefstal en omdat sy wegloop van die skool af.'

'Klink asof ons die een met die meeste probleme het.' Marcus se gesig wys dat hy die erns van Lexy se saak besef. 'Ons meisie word verbind met een van die wreedste moordenaars in die buurt.'

'Ek wonder nog steeds ... hoe op aarde kan ons hulle help?' Sami lyk 'n bietjie verlore, asof sy nie weet hoe sy hierdie ding gaan regkry nie.

'Ek dink dit is waar geloof inkom,' sug Tyler. 'Ek bedoel, ons is nie een behoorlik voorberei nie, maar ons is gewillig. Ek dink ons kan die Here vra om te voorsien wat ons kortkom.'

'Jy's reg.' Marcus steek sy hande in sy sakke. 'Miskien moet ons dit sommer dadelik doen.'

'Goeie plan.' Tyler gee Marcus 'n ligte hou op die arm. 'Jy het altyd die beste

planne, man.'

Die groep staan in 'n kringetjie, hul arms om mekaar se skouers. Mary Catherine staan tussen Sami en Marcus, en al waaraan sy kan dink, is hoe Marcus se arm om haar skouers voel. Warm en sterk en veilig. Haar arm is om sy middel. En niks het nog ooit so natuurlik en wonderlik gevoel nie.

So eg nie.

Here, help my ... ek kan nie hierdie gevoelens keer nie. Mary Catherine maak haar oë toe, en doen haar bes om nie aan Marcus langs haar te dink nie. *Here, sien U? Niks werk nie. Dit is tog nie vir my bedoel nie, net oomblikke hier en daar. Marcus sal nooit myne wees nie. Asseblief ... help my om op 'n afstand te bly. Help my om my hart in toom te hou.*

Tyler bid eerste en Mary Catherine doen haar bes om te fokus. Tyler vra die Here om hulle bonatuurlike wysheid en beskerming te gee, sodat hul pogings werklik kan bydra om die meisies se lewens te verander. Mary Catherine luister na Tyler en bid saam met hom, maar sy vind ook dat sy wens die gebed hou nooit op nie.

Na die gebed, toe Tyler en Sami al weg is na hul motor toe, gee Marcus haar skouers 'n drukkie. Sy glimlag bring 'n warmte tot diep in haar wese. Mary Catherine haal diep asem. 'Wel ... ek dink ek sal 'n bietjie by Lexy gaan kuier. Miskien kan ons in die park gaan stap. Sy ken my nie, en dalk wil sy nie. Maar ek moet probeer.'

'Goeie plan.' Marcus se oë blink by die gedagte. 'Ek sal saamgaan. Ek het aan min of meer dieselfde ding gedink.'

'Wel ...' Mary Catherine skud haar kop. 'Miskien nie hierdie keer nie.' Sy hoop hy verstaan. 'Partykeer maak meisies makliker oop as daar nie ouens by is nie. Ten minste aan die begin.'

Marcus dink daaroor na. 'Jy is seker reg.' Hy lyk teleurgesteld. 'Ek wil haar graag ontmoet voordat ons haar Saterdagoggend sien.'

'Miskien môre?' Mary Catherine vou haar arms voor haar. 'Dankie dat jy so gaaf is. En dat jy dit doen. Ek weet dit lyk nie nou so nie, maar ek moet glo dat dit sal help.'

'Dit moet net.' Hy sit weer sy hand op haar skouer, maar sy is reeds besig om weg te beweeg.

Sy waai vir hom. 'Ek sal jou laat weet hoe dit gegaan het.'

Hy lag stilletjies. 'Jy is altyd haastig.'

'Ja, seker.' Mary Catherine gee hom 'n groot glimlag. Hy moenie weet hoe sy regtig voel nie. 'Ek is altyd half laat.' Sy draai na haar motor toe. 'Sien jou môre.'

'Sien jou.'

Mary Catherine kyk in haar truspieëltjie na hom. Hy staan en kyk na haar

motor toe sy wegry. Eers toe laat sy toe dat die trane oor haar wange loop. Sy knip haar oë om hulle te keer. Daar is niks om oor te huil nie. Sy sal nooit vir Marcus Dillinger kry nie. 'Komaan, MC.' Sy vee haar trane af. 'Ruk jou reg. Jy is sterker as dit.'

Sy het in elk geval nie 'n keuse nie. Haar hart sal dit wel die een of ander tyd agterkom.

Sy hou 'n paar blokke verder stil en stuur 'n SMS na die nommer op haar kaartjie. *Haai. Mary Catherine hier. Ek is die vrywilliger wat jou die naweek gaan help. Kan ek by jou langs kom? Sal ons gaan stap? Koffie drink?*

Lexy moes haar foon by haar gehad het, want die antwoord kom dadelik terug. *Nie koffie nie.*

'Oukei.' Mary Catherine wonder wat sy volgende kan sê. Haar vingers beweeg oor die klein sleutelbord. *Miskien 'n melkskommel?*

Hierdie keer wag sy 'n bietjie langer vir die antwoord. *Ja. Ek mag nie laat uitbly nie.*

Die antwoord laat Mary Catherine glimlag. Die meisiekind het al veel erger dinge gedoen as om laat uit te bly. Maar dit is soos offisier Kent gesê het: Die meisies lieg oor alles. Hulle vertrou niemand nie. Veral nie 'n vreemdeling nie. Tog voel Mary Catherine effens hoopvol. Lexy het nie nee gesê nie. Voordat sy verder ry, stuur sy 'n SMS na Shamika. *Hoe gaan dit met Jalen? Ek dink al die hele dag aan julle twee.*

Shamika se antwoord kom ook dadelik terug. *Nog dieselfde. Die dokters sê hoe langer hy in 'n koma is, hoe erger is dit. Bid asseblief.*

Ek sal. Ek bid. En sommer so het Mary Catherine haar planne gemaak vir die res van die dag en die aand. Sy stuur nog 'n SMS. *Ek sal na ete kom kuier.*

Dankie. Shamika stuur ook 'n ikoontjie van twee biddende hande. *Partykeer is dit lekker om alleen by hom te sit, want dit is hoe dit meestal met ons is. Maar soms voel dit asof ek mal sal word as ek nie met iemand kan praat nie. Sien jou vanaand.*

Mary Catherine is dankbaar oor die vreugde in haar hart toe sy wegry. Sy het nie vir Marcus nodig om gelukkig te voel oor wat die Here in haar lewe doen nie. Sy het nie sy arm om haar skouers nodig, of sy vriendelike oë wat na haar kyk nie. Op dae soos vandag is dit genoeg om die boodskap op die sweetpaktop wat hy haar gegee het, uit te leef. Leef die lewe.

En dit is presies wat sy met God se hulp gaan doen.



MARY CATHERINE WASN'T SURPRISED at the small house Lexy lived in or the fact that it appeared to be in one of the roughest projects, just a few blocks from the youth center. Even so, she didn't worry about her own safety. This was the sort of thing Mary Catherine lived for. She knocked on the door and waited.

A young teenage girl answered. She looked down the street one way and then the other. "Come in. Hurry."

Clearly the girl didn't want to be seen talking to her. "Are you Lexy?"

"Yeah." She cocked her head back. "My grandma wants to meet you."

An older woman shuffled into the room. "My name's Anna." She shook Mary Catherine's hand. "I don't understand . . . Why do you want to take my Lexy out?"

Mary Catherine was actually glad the woman cared enough to ask. She explained her role as a volunteer for the Last Time In program. "The goal is that this will be their last time behind bars."

"I have my own crimes. Years ago." The old woman nodded. She was still beautiful, and clearly Lexy favored her. But her hands shook and she looked frail, timid. "Too many men. I'm trying to make up for it now." Tears filled her eyes. "The guns and violence, kids killing kids. It gets worse every year. You aren't someone unless you're a WestKnight or an EastTown gang member. It's not good for anyone." Anna looked at her granddaughter. "It's not too late for Lexy. She needs a way out."

Lexy stared at the floor, like she was unwilling to look at her grandmother or acknowledge the truth in the woman's statement.

Mary Catherine was still standing. She took hold of the older woman's hand for a brief few seconds. "I want to help." She looked back at Lexy. "The police agree with you. They think she has a chance. That with help she could find her way out of this life." Mary Catherine paused. "If she wants to."

Anna nodded. "Very good." She looked deep into Mary Catherine's eyes. "Take care of her." She wiped at a tear. "She's all I have."

It was a common theme here in the projects. People were broken and battered, scared and alone. Most of them were lucky to have one person who

cared for them or lived with them. For Anna, that was Lexy. Her granddaughter. The only family she had.

"We'll be gone a few hours, if that's okay." Mary Catherine had a plan in mind. But she wanted to clear it with this dear woman first.

"Yes. Please." She was trembling again. "Lexy won't talk to me. Maybe she'll open up with you."

There was so much Mary Catherine wanted to say. Questions she wanted to ask. But she needed to get to know Lexy first. "Yes, ma'am." She nodded to Anna. "I hope so."

They were in Mary Catherine's Hyundai and nearly out of the neighborhood before Lexy said anything. "Do all the volunteers do this? Take their kid out for ice cream?"

Mary Catherine thought for a minute. "Probably not." She glanced at Lexy. "I figured it'd be better if we knew each other at least a little before Saturday."

"You know what I did?" Lexy looked small and uncomfortable in the passenger seat. She stared at Mary Catherine with big eyes. "Cops tell you?"

"Yes." Mary Catherine kept her eyes on the road. "You're Dwayne Davis's girl. You were with him when he robbed a Seven-Eleven and you were with him when he killed a boy from the EastTown gang." The light ahead turned red. Mary Catherine looked straight at Lexy. "You were also with him the other night when he shot that four-year-old."

Lexy exhaled and stared out the window. After several minutes she muttered, "Why you want anything to do with me?"

"Do you want to be in a gang?" Mary Catherine felt funny using the word. But it was all Lexy would understand. "Or is it just because of Dwayne?"

Maybe it was the first time Lexy had thought about it. She took her time answering, and for a long time she stared straight ahead. Finally she looked at Mary Catherine. "I like it. Every girl wanna be Dwayne's shorty." Defiance rang in her voice. "But he picked me."

Mary Catherine thought about correcting her English but then let it go. One step at a time. "We're here." She pointed to a Dairy Queen up ahead. "You want a milkshake or a sundae?"

Lexy seemed stumped by the question. They pulled into the parking lot and the two of them walked inside. At the counter, Mary Catherine pointed to the menu. "Have whatever you want."

"Anything?" The word sounded almost angry, as if Lexy didn't believe this. Like there had to be a catch. "What about a burger?"

"Sure. Get a burger and ice cream, if you want." Mary Catherine wasn't hungry. Besides, there was nothing on the menu she could eat. She had to give

her heart a fighting chance.

“Okay.” Lexy looked up at the menu, then back at Mary Catherine. “What’s the thing where they chop up candy and ice cream in a cup?”

“A Blizzard?”

“Yeah.” It was the first time Lexy had smiled since Mary Catherine stepped into her house. “I’ll have a cheeseburger and that.”

The girl behind the counter looked impatient. “What kind of Blizzard?”

Lexy settled on vanilla ice cream with Oreo cookies and hot fudge sauce. “And whipped cream.”

“ ‘Please,’ ” Mary Catherine reminded her.

The surprise on Lexy’s face was as real as the air they were breathing. She turned back to the cashier. “Please.”

Good, Mary Catherine thought. *It’s a start.*

“Where we goin’?” Lexy focused on her Blizzard. “You said we’d be out for a couple hours.”

“I’m taking you to Elysian Park. It’s near Dodger Stadium.” Mary Catherine used her GPS to lead the way. The park was another fifteen miles from the Dairy Queen.

Lexy looked nervous. “You been there before?”

“No. They have trails. There’ll be people all around.” Mary Catherine smiled, her eyes on the road. “I thought we could walk for a while, get to know each other. We can leave whenever you want and then I’ll take you home.”

Lexy didn’t say anything. Either she didn’t have an opinion or she didn’t care. Twenty minutes later they parked in the lot at Academy Road and Elysian Park Drive. Mary Catherine had read that the other side of the park could be shady. This part was supposed to have well-marked trails with beautiful views of the city and the stadium.

It was a park Tyler and Sami had told her about.

They started up the trail and Mary Catherine waited until they found their stride. Lexy was still finishing her Blizzard. “What do you want to tell me, Lexy?”

She peered over the edge of her cup at Mary Catherine and shrugged. “Got nothing to say.”

This wasn’t going to be easy. But the time was worth it. She could feel the girl’s guard dropping, even just a little. “Why do you want to be Dwayne Davis’s girl?”

Lexy cocked her head back again, doing her best to look tough, no doubt. “Dwayne gonna be leader of the gang. That makes me famous, too.”

Mary Catherine resisted the urge to roll her eyes. In Lexy’s world, her

reason mattered. Mary Catherine was careful to use a gentle tone: "Lexy . . . Dwayne's behind bars. He's not getting out. Not ever."

The cockiness in Lexy's expression faded. Suddenly she looked like a lost little girl. "That ain't true. Dwayne told me he was getting out."

"He's not." Mary Catherine looked at Lexy. They were walking, but their pace was slow. "They've got Dwayne on at least two counts of murder. Attempted murder. Dealing. Robbery. I talked to the police, Lexy. They don't believe Dwayne will ever get out."

The girl looked at her nearly empty ice cream cup, and at the next trashcan she threw away what was left. Again they walked in silence for a while until Mary Catherine could think of the right next question.

"You'd be locked up, too. That's why you're doing this program. So you don't have to. Because you're so young." Mary Catherine wasn't sure how much the girl understood. "You know that, right?"

"I guess." She crossed her arms tightly in front of herself as they walked.

"What happens when your guy goes to prison? Are you still part of the gang?"

Lexy looked frightened again. "The guys, they take turns. They'll fight it out. Who gets me next."

Her answer wasn't entirely clear but Mary Catherine figured she'd heard enough to know. The guys would take turns with her? That could only mean one thing. Lexy was little more than a child, and yet she took it in stride. Like being treated that way was a rite of passage.

"You know something, Lexy?" Mary Catherine had to start speaking truth into the girl. "You don't have to let them do that. What's in it for you? Being in the gang and having guys do that?"

"They keep me safe." She jerked her head back again. "Once a WestKnight, always a WestKnight. EastTown Boyz don't mess with you if your man's a WestKnight. You in, then."

"So the EastTown Boyz don't hurt you . . . but the WestKnight boys do. How is that a good thing?" Mary Catherine kept her words slow and even. She didn't want to make Lexy too upset. Officer Kent had warned that when pushed too hard most of these girls would shut down. Sometimes for good.

But Lexy wasn't shutting down. Her expression softened, like maybe she had never thought about that before. How staying in the WestKnights could be a good thing when she was going to be hurt either way.

Lexy looked up at her. "What other choice I got?"

"That's what we're going to try to figure out, me and you." Mary Catherine hesitated. "You know who your other volunteer is?"

The girl looked straight ahead, her steps slow. "I get two?"

“You all do.” She smiled. “The other one is a guy. Marcus Dillinger.”

Lexy stopped walking. She stared at Mary Catherine and her eyes grew wide. “From the Dodgers? The pitcher?”

“Yes.” Mary Catherine let that sink in for a few seconds. “The one Dwayne tried to kill.”

“No.” She started to shake her head. “He can’t come. He can’t see me.” She looked over her shoulder like she might run. “He’ll know it’s me.”

“Lexy.” Mary Catherine put her hand on the girl’s back. “Honey, Marcus knows who you are. He wanted to do this *because* of that. He wanted to come today. We both believe you have a chance. A way out of this.”

“I don’t want to meet him.” She looked away and began walking again, faster this time. As if she were in a hurry to finish the hike. “I just wanna go home.”

Mary Catherine kept up with her. Lexy was shiftY and hesitant and probably—like Officer Kent said—ready to shut down completely. Whatever the girl felt deep inside her heart, it would take much effort to find it.

If they could find it at all.



LEXY HAD NEVER felt like this in all her life. She didn’t want to say too much, didn’t want to open up. But something about Mary Catherine made her do it. Like the white girl really cared.

“Tell me about your parents.” Mary Catherine wouldn’t give up. No matter how quiet and rude Lexy was, the girl kept trying.

“What’s to tell?” Lexy stared at the ground as they walked. “My dad was killed when I was a baby. My mom’s in prison. You met my grandma.” She was about to tell Mary Catherine how she’d raised herself, but at that exact minute they rounded a corner and stopped. Two police officers were arresting a skinny white man with a long beard. Right here on the trail.

Lexy stopped and next to her Mary Catherine did the same thing. The guy looked creepy.

“Come on.” Mary Catherine put her arm around Lexy’s shoulder and eased her past the scene.

One of the officers turned to her. “You girls okay?”

“Yes, sir.” Mary Catherine answered first. “Is it safe?”

“This park?” The officer glanced at the guy in handcuffs. “It’s never completely safe up here. But yes. You can get back to the parking lot okay. Call nine-one-one if you see anything out of the ordinary.”

“We will, sir. Thank you.” When they got past the men, Mary Catherine gently released her hold on Lexy and picked up her pace. “Let’s get back.”

“Yeah. Maybe the park wasn’t such a great idea.”

They didn’t talk much on the way back to the parking lot, but Lexy couldn’t let go of the feeling that she wanted to trust Mary Catherine. The older girl seemed really interested in her answers. In her as a person. The reality made her feel a lot of things. Hope, maybe. Happiness—if this was what happiness felt like. But something else, too.

Fear.

Lexy had learned a long time ago that the worst thing on the streets wasn’t the thugs or the bullets or the way a brother threw a girl on a bed and had his way with her. It wasn’t a break-in or a drug bust or getting arrested.

The worst thing was caring.



JAG AND ASPYN hovered over the house where Lexy lived. They watched the two girls pull up in Mary Catherine’s car and walk inside.

“Thank You, God.” Jag was exhausted. He and Aspyn had more strategizing ahead. No mission had ever been more taxing. Despite that, Jag was overcome with relief. “The things that man on the path planned to do to Mary Catherine and Lexy . . .”

Aspyn closed her eyes. “Unspeakable. You stepped in at just the right time. Pulling him out of the bushes onto the path was the right thing to do. Instead of running, he was forced into the light.”

The bearded man had been waiting in the bushes, ready to attack Mary Catherine and Lexy. Jag had appeared from the shadows and ordered the guy to step onto the path.

When the man pushed further back into the brush, Jag grabbed his arm and pulled him out. In one swift move, Jag had the guy pinned to the ground, his arm bent behind his back. That’s when Jag had seen the gun in the man’s sock. He grabbed it and the guy’s cell phone and called 911. Two officers were already at the park. Just before they turned the bend on the trail and drew their guns, Jag dropped the gun, stepped into the brush, and disappeared.

Jag was grateful for the control he’d learned the last time. He had no desire to kill the man in the bushes. Protecting Mary Catherine and Lexy was all that mattered. Orlon had been right. The mission was very dangerous. Evil lurked around every corner and this much was certain.

The stakes had never been higher.

M

ary Catherine is nie verbaas oor hoe klein die huisie is waarin Lexy woon nie. Ook nie oor die feit dat dit in een van die swakste dele van die buurt is nie, net 'n paar blokke van die jeugsentrum af. Sy is nie bekommerd oor haar eie veiligheid nie. Dis die soort ding waarvoor Mary Catherine lewe. Sy klop aan die deur en wag.

'n Jong tienermeisie maak die deur oop. Sy kyk op en af in die straat. 'Kom in. Maak gou.'

Dis duidelik dat die meisie nie wil hê mense moet sien sy praat met Mary Catherine nie. 'Is jy Lexy?'

'Ja.' Sy hou haar kop skeef. 'My ouma wil jou ontmoet.'

'n Ou vrou kom met 'n skuifelstappie in. 'My naam is Anna.' Sy skud Mary Catherine se hand. 'Ek verstaan nie ... waarom wil jy my Lexy uitneem?'

Mary Catherine is bly die ou vrou gee genoeg om om te vra. Sy verduidelik haar rol as vrywilliger vir die Laaste Keer In-program. 'Die doel is dat dit haar laaste keer in die tronk sal wees.'

'Ek self het ook verkeerde dinge gedoen. Jare gelede.' Die vrou knik. Sy is nog mooi, en Lexy trek op haar. Maar haar hande bewe en sy lyk tenger en bang. 'Te veel mans. Ek probeer nou daarvoor opmaak.' Daar is trane in haar oë. 'Die wapens en die geweld. Kinders wat kinders doodmaak. Dit word elke jaar erger. Jy is niemand tensy jy 'n WestKnight of een van die EastTown Boyz is nie. Dit is vir niemand goed nie.' Anna kyk na haar kleindogter. 'Dis nie te laat vir Lexy nie. Sy moet 'n manier kry om weg te kom.'

Lexy staar na die vloer. Sy wil nie na haar ouma kyk of erken dat die vrou die waarheid praat nie.

Mary Catherine het nie gaan sit nie. Sy hou die vrou se hande vir 'n sekonde of twee vas. 'Ek wil help.' Sy kyk na Lexy. 'Die polisie stem saam met u. Hulle dink Lexy het 'n kans. En dat as sy hulp kry, sy 'n manier kan vind om uit hierdie soort lewe weg te kom.' Mary Catherine bly stil. 'As sy wil.'

Anna knik. 'Dis goed so.' Sy kyk diep in Mary Catherine se oë. 'Pas haar op.' Sy vee trane af. 'Sy is al wat ek het.'

Dit is 'n algemene tema hier in die woonbuurt. Mense is gebroke en sonder hoop, bang en alleen. Die meeste is gelukkig as daar een ander mens is wat vir hulle omgee of by hulle woon. Anna het vir Lexy. Haar kleindogter. Al familie wat sy het.

'Ons sal 'n uur of wat weg wees, as dit reg is met u.' Mary Catherine het 'n plan in haar kop, maar sy wil die ouma se toestemming hê.

‘Ja. Asseblief.’ Die vrou bewee weer. ‘Lexy wil nie met my praat nie. Miskien sal sy by jou oopmaak.’

Mary Catherine het baie dinge om te sê, baie vrae om te vra. Maar eers wil sy Lexy ’n bietjie beter leer ken. ‘Ja, mevrou.’ Sy knik vir Anna. ‘Ek hoop so.’ Hulle is in Mary Catherine se motor en amper uit die woonbuurt voordat Lexy iets sê. ‘Doen al die vrywilligers dit? Neem hulle kind uit vir roomys?’

Mary Catherine dink ’n oomblik na. ‘Seker nie.’ Sy kyk na Lexy. ‘Ek het gedink dit sal beter wees as ons mekaar ’n bietjie leer ken voor Saterdag.’

‘Weet jy wat ek gedoen het?’ Lexy lyk klein en ongemaklik op die passasiersistplek. Sy staar met groot oë na Mary Catherine. ‘Het die polisie jou vertel?’

‘Ja.’ Mary Catherine hou haar oë op die pad. ‘Jy is Dwayne Davis se meisie. Jy was by toe hy die winkel beroof het, en ook toe hy ’n outjie van die EastTown Boyz doodgeskiet het.’ Die lig is rooi. Mary Catherine kyk reguit na Lexy. ‘Jy was ook by toe hy daardie vierjarige kind geskiet het.’

Lexy blaas haar asem uit en staar deur die venster. Na ’n paar minute mompel sy: ‘Waarom wil jy iets met my te doen hê?’

‘Wil jy in ’n bende wees?’ Dis vreemd om oor sulke dinge te praat, maar Mary Catherine wil Lexy leer verstaan. ‘Of is dit net oor Dwayne?’

Miskien is dit die eerste keer dat Lexy so daaroor dink. Sy bly lank stil, staar net voor haar uit voordat sy antwoord. Eindelik kyk sy na Mary Catherine. ‘Ek hou daarvan. Al die meisies wil Dwayne se meisie wees.’ Daar is ’n weerbarstigheid in haar stem. ‘Maar hy het my gekies.’

Mary Catherine dink aan maniere om hierop te reageer, maar besluit om dit daar te laat. Een treetjie op ’n keer. ‘Hier is ons.’ Sy wys na die Dairy Queen ’n entjie verder aan. ‘Melkskommel of roomys?’

Dis asof Lexy nie weet wat om te sê nie. Hulle hou stil en die twee gaan na die restaurant. By die toonbank wys Mary Catherine na die spyskaart. ‘Bestel net wat jy wil.’

‘Enige iets?’ Sy klink kwaad, amper asof sy haar nie glo nie. Asof daar iewers ’n vangplek moet wees. ‘Wat van ’n hamburger?’

‘Ja, natuurlik. Kry ’n hamburger en roomys, as dit is wat jy wil hê.’ Mary Catherine is nie honger nie. Sy eet buitendien nie suiker of brood nie. Dit is een manier om haar hart te help om langer uit te hou.

‘Goed.’ Lexy kyk na die spyskaart en dan weer na Mary Catherine. ‘Wat noem hulle daardie ding waar hulle die koekies en roomys in ’n koppie deurmekaarmaak?’

‘’n Blizzard?’

‘Ja.’ Vir die eerste keer vandat Mary Catherine aan haar deur geklop het, glimlag Lexy. ‘Ek wil ’n kaasburger en dit hê.’

Die meisie agter die toonbank lyk ongeduldig. ‘Watter soort blizzard?’

Lexy kies sjokoladeroomys en Oreo-koekies en warm fudgesous. ‘En geklopte room.’

‘Asseblief,’ herinner Mary Catherine haar.

Die verbasing op Lexy se gesig is so eg soos die lug wat hulle inasem. Sy draai weer na die meisie toe. ‘Asseblief.’

Gaaf, dink Mary Catherine. *Dis ’n begin*.

‘Waarnatoe gaan ons?’ Lexy konsentreer op haar roomys. ‘Jy het gesê ons sal langer as ’n uur weg wees.’

‘Ek neem jou na ’n park toe. Dis naby die Dodgers se stadion.’ Mary Catherine stel haar GPS om die pad te vind; dit is byna vyf-en-twintig kilometer van die Dairy Queen af.

Lexy lyk senuweeagtig. ‘Was jy al voorheen daar?’

‘Nee. Daar is paadjies waar jy kan stap. Daar sal baie ander mense ook wees.’ Mary Catherine glimlag, maar hou haar oë op die pad. ‘Ek het gedink ons kan bietjie daar rondstap en mekaar leer ken. Ons kan bly tot jy huis toe wil gaan; ek sal jou neem.’

Lexy sê niks. Óf sy het nie ’n opinie nie, óf sy gee nie om nie. Twintig minute later parkeer hulle in ’n parkeerarea naby die park. Mary Catherine het gelees dat die ander kant van die park nogal twyfelagtig kan wees, maar dat hierdie deel duidelik gemerkte paadjies het, met uitsigte oor die stad en die stadion.

Tyler en Sami het haar van die park vertel.

Hulle kies ’n paadjie en Mary Catherine wag tot hulle ’n gemaklike pas gevind het. Lexy is nog besig met haar roomys. ‘Wat wil jy vir my sê, Lexy?’ Sy loer oor haar bakkie na Mary Catherine en haal haar skouers op. ‘Niks.’ Dit gaan nie maklik wees nie. Maar hul uitstappie is tog die moeite werd. Mary Catherine kan voel hoe die meisie ’n bietjie begin ontspan, al is dit net ’n klein bietjie. ‘Waarom wil jy Dwayne Davis se meisie wees?’

Lexy draai weer haar kop skeef. Sy probeer seker selfversekerd lyk, dink Mary Catherine. ‘Dwayne gaan die leier van die bende word. Dit sal my ook beroemd maak.’

Mary Catherine weerstaan die drang om skepties te lyk – in Lexy se wêreld sal sulke dinge saak maak. Mary Catherine sê sag: ‘Lexy, Dwayne is in die tronk. Hy gaan nie uitkom nie. Dalk nooit nie.’

Lexy se uitdagende uitdrukking vervaag. Sy lyk skielik soos ’n verdwaalde klein dogtertjie. ‘Is nie. Dwayne het gesê hy sal gou uitkom.’

‘Nee.’ Mary Catherine kyk na Lexy. Hulle stap maar stadig. ‘Hulle kla Dwayne van twee moorde aan. En poging tot moord. Dwelmshandel. Diefstal. Ek het met die polisie gepraat, Lexy. Hulle glo nie Dwayne gaan ooit uitkom nie.’

Die meisie kyk na haar roomys, en by die volgende vullisblik gooi sy dit weg. Hulle stap in stilte verder terwyl Mary Catherine probeer uitwerk wat die regte vraag sal wees.

‘Jy sou ook opgesluit gewees het. Dit is hoekom jy hierdie program doen. Sodat jy nie hoof tronk toe te gaan nie. Omdat jy jonk is.’ Mary Catherine is nie seker of die meisie ooit verstaan nie. ‘Jy weet dit mos, of hoe?’

‘Seker.’ Sy vou haar arms in die stap voor haar.

‘Wat gebeur as Dwayne tronk toe gaan? Bly jy nog deel van die bende?’

Lexy lyk weer bang. ‘Die ouens maak beurte. Hulle sal daarvoor baklei. Wie my volgende kry.’

Haar antwoord is nie heeltemal duidelik nie, maar Mary Catherine dink sy verstaan genoeg. Die ouens maak beurte? Dit beteken net een ding. Lexy is skaars meer as ’n kind, en tog aanvaar sy dit as vanselfsprekend. Asof dié soort behandeling deel van die grootwordproses is.

‘Weet jy wat, Lexy?’ Mary Catherine moet die waarheid met die meisie begin praat. ‘Jy hoef dit nie te doen nie. Wat is daarin vir jou? Om in ’n bende te wees, waar die ouens dit altyd aan jou kan doen?’

‘Hulle beskerm my.’ Sy ruk haar kop op. ‘Eenmaal ’n WestKnight, altyd ’n WestKnight. Die EastTown Boyz kan nie met jou mors as jy ’n WestKnight se meisie is nie. So jy’s in.’

‘So die EastTown Boyz sal jou nie seermaak nie, maar die WestKnights kan maar? Hoe kan dit ’n goeie ding wees?’ Mary Catherine hou haar stemtoon laag en gemoedelik. Sy wil Lexy nie te veel ontstel nie. Offisier Kent het gewaarsku dat as hulle te hard probeer, die meisies toeklap. Partykeer permanent.

Maar Lexy klap nie toe nie. Haar uitdrukking versag, asof sy nog nooit so daarvoor gedink het nie: hoe dit goed kan wees om in die WestKnights te bly as sy in elk geval gaan seerkry.

Lexy kyk na haar. ‘Wat anders kan ek doen?’

‘Dis wat ek en jy moet probeer uitwerk.’ Mary Catherine bly ’n rukkie stil. ‘Weet jy wie jou ander vrywilliger is?’

Die meisie kyk weer voor haar uit. Sy stap al stadiger. ‘Het ek twee?’

‘Ja, elkeen van julle het twee.’ Sy glimlag. ‘Die ander een is ’n man. Marcus Dillinger.’

Lexy gaan staan botstil. Sy staar Mary Catherine met groot oë aan. ‘Van die Dodgers? Die gooier?’

‘Ja.’ Mary Catherine laat die woorde insink. ‘Die een wat Dwayne wou doodskiet.’

‘Nee.’ Sy skud haar kop. ‘Hy moenie kom nie. Hy moet my nie sien nie.’ Sy kyk oor haar skouers asof sy wil begin hardloop. ‘Hy sal weet dit was ek.’

‘Lexy.’ Mary Catherine sit haar hand op die meisie se rug. ‘Marcus weet wie jy is. Hy wou dit doen, juis oor wat gebeur het. Hy wou vandag saamkom. Ons glo al twee jy het ’n kans. Om hier uit te kom.’

‘Ek wil hom nie sien nie.’ Sy kyk weg, en begin weer stap, vinniger as voorheen. Dis asof sy haastig is om die einde van die stap te bereik. ‘Ek wil huis toe gaan.’

Mary Catherine hou maklik by. Lexy is onseker en onrustig en – soos offisier Kent gesê het – gereed om heeltemal toe te klap. Wat daar ook al diep in haar hart is, sal baie moeilik na die oppervlak gebring word.

As hulle dit ooit kan regkry.

~

Lexy het nog nooit so gevoel soos vandag nie. Sy wil nie te veel uitblaker nie, wil nie begin vertel wat regtig in haar hart is nie. Maar iets aan Mary Catherine laat haar dit tog doen. Dis asof die wit meisie regtig omgee.

‘Vertel my van jou ouers.’ Mary Catherine gaan nie moed verloor nie. Al is Lexy hoe geslote en selfs onbeskof, hou sy aan probeer.

‘Ag, daar’s niks te vertel nie.’ Lexy loop en staar na die grond. ‘My pa is doodgemaak toe ek nog ’n baba was. My ma is in die tronk. Jy het my ouma ontmoet.’ Sy wil net vir Mary Catherine vertel dat sy eintlik maar op haar eie grootgeword het, toe hulle om ’n draai loop en in hul spore vassteek. Twee polisiemanne is besig om ’n maer wit man met ’n lang baard te arresteer. Daar voor hulle in die padjie.

Die twee meisies staar die toneeltjie aan. Die man lyk grillerig.

‘Kom.’ Mary Catherine sit haar arm om Lexy se skouers om haar verby die mans te lei.

Een van die polisiemanne draai na haar toe. ‘Alles reg met julle twee?’

‘Ja, dankie.’ Dis Mary Catherine wat antwoord. ‘Is dit veilig om verder te stap?’

‘Hier in die park?’ Die polisieman kyk na die geboeide man. ‘Dis nooit heeltemal veilig hier bo nie, maar ja. Dis veilig tot by die parkeerarea. Bel die nooddiens as julle iets vreemds gewaar.’

‘Ons sal. Dankie.’

Toe hulle by die mans verby is, neem Mary Catherine haar hand van Lexy se skouers af en begin vinniger loop. ‘Kom ons gaan terug.’

‘Ja, miskien was die park nie so ’n goeie idee nie.’

Hulle praat nie veel op pad terug nie, maar Lexy dink die hele tyd aan die gevoel wat Mary Catherine haar gee. Dat sy regtig belang stel in haar antwoorde. In haar as mens. En dit laat haar weer ander dinge voel, dinge soos hoop. Selfs ’n bietjie gelukkigheid – as dit is hoe gelukkigheid voel. Maar

daar is nog iets.

Vrees.

Lexy het lank gelede al geleer dat die gevaarlikste ding op straat nie die bendes is, of 'n koeël of hoe bendeledede 'n meisie kan verniel nie. Ook nie inbraak of 'n polisie-klopjag of selfs arrestasie nie.

Die gevaarlikste ding is om om te gee.

~

Jag en Aspyn sweef oor Lexy se huis. Hulle kyk hoe Mary Catherine voor die huis stilhou en die twee meisies instap.

'Dankie, Here.' Jag voel uitgeput. Hy en Aspyn sal nog planne moet beraam vir wat voorlê. Hulle het nog nie so 'n uitmergelende sending beleef nie. En tog voel Jag oorweldig van verligting. 'Die dinge wat daardie man vandag met Mary Catherine en Lexy wou aanvang ...'

Aspyn sluit haar oë. 'Mens kan nie eens daarvan praat nie. Jy het net betyds ingegryp ... dit was die regte ding om te doen, om hom uit die bosse en op die paadjie te sleep. Hy kon nie weghardloop nie, jy het hom na die lig gedwing.'

Die bebaarde man het in die bosse weggekrui met die plan om Mary Catherine en Lexy aan te val. Jag het uit die niet verskyn en hom beveel om na die paadjie te gaan.

Toe die man dieper in die bosse wou wegduik, het Jag hom aan die arm beetgekry en na die paadjie gesleep. Met een vinnige beweging het hy hom op die grond vasgepen en sy arm agter sy rug gebuig. Dis toe dat hy die man se wapen sien. Hy het dit gegryp en die man se selfoon gebruik om die polisie te bel. Daar was twee polisiemanne aan diens in die park en net voordat hulle die toneel bereik het, het Jag die wapen laat val en self in die bosse verdwyn.

Jag is dankbaar dat hy die vorige keer meer selfbeheersing geleer het. Hy het geen begeerte gevoel om die man dood te skiet nie. Hy wou net vir Mary Catherine en Lexy beskerm. Orlon was reg. Die sending is gevaarlik. Die bese sluipt oral rond, en een ding is seker.

Daar is baie op die spel.



MARCUS MET TYLER AT the hospital that afternoon to give blood. Whether Jalen could use it or not didn't matter. Someone could. They were in the lobby waiting their turn when Charlie Kent came in.

"Brought in another two gunshot victims today. They'll both live but they're in bad shape." The officer looked weary. "I haven't seen this much violence in years."

He took the seat opposite Marcus and Tyler. "We made an arrest an hour ago near Dodger Stadium. Story could've wound up very differently."

Marcus couldn't imagine being a police officer in Los Angeles. "What happened?"

"An officer from another precinct was walking the trail. He found a man in the bushes and recognized him from the wanted list. Called for backup and a couple of our guys made the arrest." Officer Kent shook his head. "The guy's on our most-wanted list, multiple homicides, rape, attacks on kids. Escaped prison in Northern California a year ago."

A sense of satisfaction came over Marcus. "Glad you caught him."

"What was he doing in the bushes?" Tyler also seemed gripped by the story.

"That's the scary part. A couple of girls were walking the trail. A few minutes more and they would've walked right past the guy. We think he was planning an attack. Waiting for the young women to walk by."

The pieces came together, and Marcus felt like he was falling, like he couldn't feel his feet beneath him. "What . . . what park did you say it was?"

"Elysian Park. Near Dodger Stadium." Officer Kent stood. "You two here to see the little boy?"

"Yeah." Marcus stood and shook the officer's hand. Were the girls at the park Mary Catherine and Lexy? He tried to focus. "We're giving blood, too. It's something we can do."

The officer shook Tyler's hand next. "That's how we all feel. Trying to make a difference best we can." He tipped his hat. "See you tomorrow night for training."

"Looking forward to it." Marcus slowly sat back in his seat. His heart pounded so loud he thought it would break through his chest.

Tyler stared at him. "You okay?"

"Elysian Park." Marcus couldn't slow his heartbeat. "That's where Mary Catherine took Lexy."

Tyler let the pieces connect for a moment. "You think maybe the two girls were . . ."

"It's possible." He put his face in his hands for a few seconds and then looked up. "I should've gone with them. Forget that girl-bonding thing. The

city isn't safe."

"Text Mary Catherine and ask her."

Marcus didn't want to wait that long. He pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped Mary Catherine's number. She answered after two rings.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?" His words sounded too loud, too intense. He forced himself to calm down. Wherever she was, at least she was okay.

"Leaving Lexy's house." Mary Catherine was clearly taken aback by his tone. "What's wrong?"

Marcus put his head in his free hand and exhaled. *Slow down*, he told himself. "Did you take her to Elysian Park? Like you said?"

"I did. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start. She's tough." Hesitancy still rang in Mary Catherine's words. "You sound upset. What happened?"

"Did you see police there?"

"Actually, yes." Mary Catherine paused. "Two officers arrested a man on the path just ahead of us. Kind of creepy."

Marcus stood and paced the length of the waiting room and back. "He was a very dangerous guy. I just talked to Officer Kent and he said . . . the man might've been lying in wait."

"For us?" It was the first time Mary Catherine sounded fearful.

"Possibly." Marcus couldn't believe it. Mary Catherine and Lexy had been in danger and if something had happened . . . He couldn't finish the thought. "God was with you. Looking out for you."

"The officers didn't tell us." Mary Catherine's voice held a fear Marcus hadn't heard from her before. "If Lexy had been hurt, I never could've forgiven myself. We had no idea."

"It's behind you now. Just . . . please, Mary Catherine, be careful. You should've let me come with you." He sat down and leaned back hard. It felt so good to hear her voice, to know she was okay. His tone lightened some. "Remember that next time."

"You're right." A warmth filled her voice. "Sorry. I was kind of quick to turn you down."

"We're in this together, this volunteer thing." He leaned his elbows on his knees. "Let me help, okay?"

"Okay." For the first time since she answered the phone he could hear her smile across the phone line. "Where are you?"

"At the hospital." He wasn't a fan of needles, but this was important. "Tyler and I are giving blood."

"Nice." Again her tone was softer. "How's Jalen?"

"About the same." Marcus felt the heaviness of the child's situation.

“We’re going to see him and Shamika next.”

“I’ll be there in a few hours.” She sounded like herself again. The fear from earlier gone. “I’ll probably miss you.”

“See, there you go again. Trying to avoid me.” He chuckled. “Just kidding.” He paused. “Be safe, Mary Catherine. Please.”

“I will.”

The call ended as Marcus and Tyler were called back. They took cots next to each other and in no time they were hooked up and watching bags fill with their blood.

“I hate needles.” Marcus looked away from the one in his arm. “I have to believe this is for kids like Jalen.”

“Really, though?” Tyler moved his arm and winced. “It’ll probably help the two gang guys just brought in.”

Marcus hadn’t thought about that. The possibility didn’t sit well with him. Give blood for guys caught up in gang violence for what? So they could get back out on the streets and shoot each other again? He gritted his teeth and tried not to think about it.

“You and Sami doing anything this weekend?” He put one arm behind his head so he could see Tyler better. “Besides the prison tour, obviously.”

Tyler laughed in a way that was more concerned than humorous. “That’ll probably leave us pretty worn out.”

“True.” Between donating blood and the prison tour, Tyler was right.

“Hey, I almost forgot.” Tyler faced him. “Tomorrow morning Sami and Mary Catherine are going to the beach. Supposed to be another warm day like last week.”

“Sounds fun.” He uttered a brief laugh. “Mary Catherine didn’t tell me about it.”

“Well, Sami did. She asked us both to come.”

“Really?” Marcus smiled. “Did she check with Mary Catherine?”

“Come on, Dillinger.” Tyler laughed. “You don’t really think MC’s trying to avoid you. I mean, she agreed to work with you on the prison program, right?”

“She didn’t really have a choice.” Marcus gave Tyler a wary look. “Remember? A police officer asked her to talk to me about it.”

“Well . . . don’t forget she could be a little leery, what with Shelly Wayne and all.”

Marcus sighed. “Yeah. About Shelly.” He looked out the window and thought about the situation. “I need to talk to Coach.”

“Why?” Tyler made a face. “He won’t be upset if things don’t work out with you and Shelly.”

“She’s his niece.” Marcus felt trapped. “I never should’ve agreed to call her.”

Tyler waited, a knowing look on his face. “Whatever you do, you need to figure it out. The other night was awful.”

They finished giving blood and Marcus gulped down the orange juice and crackers. He stayed close to the wall until he felt less light-headed. Tyler took it all in stride. “You live with your arm hanging halfway to your knee for a few months and giving blood’ll feel like a day at Disneyland.”

The two friends laughed as they left the unit. But as they reached the elevator and rode it up to the intensive care unit, they grew quiet. “I keep praying.” Tyler drew a tired breath as they walked down the hall toward the nurses’ station. “I just wish God would wake the boy up.”

Tyler had agreed to wait while Marcus visited the boy. Marcus felt the familiar ache in his heart as he reached the child’s room. The door was partly open and Shamika was inside, sitting close to her son, holding his hand and talking softly. She looked up as Marcus stood at the doorway.

“Please. Come in.” Shamika stood and hugged him. “Thank you for coming.”

“How is he?” Marcus walked up to the bed and put his hand over the boy’s much smaller one. He looked up at the machines, whirring and buzzing and clicking like before.

“He’s still in a coma.” Shamika’s face looked tearstained. “I’m begging God he might wake up today.” She paused and her voice fell. “Doctor says it needs to be soon. For Jalen’s brain to work right.”

The weight of the situation pressed in on Marcus’s shoulders and sucked the air from the room. Jalen had been so trusting, so willing to help that night.

“Is there anything I can do? Do you need help?”

“Ask people to pray. Please.” Her eyes grew watery. “I want God to know I’m not giving up.”

Marcus nodded. “I can do that. I’ll tell everyone.” He needed to do more of that. Of course he and his friends had been praying. But who else had he asked? More than half a million people followed him on Twitter and he hadn’t said a word. He pursed his lips. “I promise you, Shamika. I’ll get people to pray for your boy.”



AS THEY LEFT the hospital, Marcus and Tyler were quiet. They didn’t talk until they were outside in the parking lot. The whole time Marcus thought about Twitter. All of Los Angeles knew he’d been shot at. The *Times* had run the news on the front page. So everyone who followed him on Twitter would’ve

already heard that he'd been a victim of gang violence in his attempt to make the youth center a success.

Why hadn't he asked anyone to pray for Jalen?

"I have an idea." Marcus pulled out his phone. "You still on Twitter?"

"Yeah." Tyler hadn't started the car yet. He found his phone in his front pocket and looked at it. "I haven't used social media since I came here."

"Maybe now's the time to start." He opened his Twitter app. "You got a hundred forty characters to ask everyone listening to pray for Jalen. Let's do this."

Marcus's tweet was simple.

There's a little boy fighting for his life in an LA hospital. He took the bullet intended for me. Ask God for a miracle. #prayforJalen

Marcus reread his words and then looked out the window. *Lord, forgive me for not thinking of asking them sooner. I'm new at this. And please . . . help Jalen. He needs You more than ever, God.*

He sent the tweet and looked at Tyler. "Done."

"Me, too." Tyler slipped his phone back in his pocket. "Let's see what happens."



THEY WENT TO In-N-Out across the street for burgers and talked a little more about Jalen and Shamika and the youth center. And whether they were in over their heads.

Marcus thought maybe they were.

Halfway through the meal Marcus checked his Twitter. "This is crazy!" He couldn't believe it. "Almost a hundred thousand people have retweeted it. And it's only been twenty minutes."

Tyler checked his and found a similarly high number of retweets. Marcus stared at his phone and blinked back tears. The gesture meant more than any of his followers could've known. Reading their comments, Marcus could see some of them were doing more than simply retweeting. They promised to pray. At a time when violence seemed the norm and kids didn't seem to care about each other, clearly there were some who actually did.

It was a surge of hope Marcus needed—especially since he needed to go by the youth center later and see how things were going. He'd hired a full-time director a week ago, and today the guy had reported that things were calm.

Marcus wanted more than calm, of course. But in light of the events this week calm was an improvement.

As they walked to their separate vehicles, Tyler gave him a light punch in

the arm. “You’re going with me tomorrow morning. To the beach.” He slid his phone back in his pocket. “No excuses.”

He still lived with Tyler, so it’d be easy to go. But Marcus wasn’t sure. “Someone should ask Mary Catherine.”

“Sami said she’d be fine.” Tyler held up his hands. “Really, man? You’re letting the girl intimidate you.”

“We’ll see.” Marcus tossed his keys in his hands. “I’ll think about it.”

“We’re all friends.” He pointed at Marcus. “See you at nine tomorrow.”

The discussion was over.

Marcus drove to the youth center, and the whole way he debated whether he should go. He thought about Mary Catherine all the time and found himself counting down the hours till the next time they would see each other. But going with Tyler to the beach felt a little intrusive. Mary Catherine hadn’t invited him, no matter what she told Sami.

He tried to put the thought from his mind. At the center he checked in with the new director. The report was mostly good. Kids were still coming for help with their homework, still showing up to play basketball every night around seven. Lots of them had asked if there would be pizza again this Tuesday.

“You’d think the shooting would keep them away.” Marcus still didn’t understand life on the streets.

“It has no effect at all.” The director used to be a football coach at an area high school. He was perfect to manage the youth center. “These kids think nothing of a shooting. Very different from the way you and I might see it.”

The futility stayed with Marcus as he left. He planned on going home and getting in another workout before turning in for the night. But there were too many thoughts battling for his attention.

Instead he drove to Dodger Stadium.

Spring training was coming fast. A couple of months at Camelback Ranch in Arizona, and then they’d be in full swing for the season. He was on the roster as their top pitcher again, so his time with Mary Catherine would be infrequent at best.

The stadium was empty, the way he expected for a Thursday night in early January. Marcus used his key to get into the back of the facility and then found a spot near the top of the bleachers. The sun was setting, spreading pink and blue across the sky.

Something about being here always helped him think. Helped him get his priorities right. He’d been reading his Bible now—ever since the walk with Mary Catherine. He’d bought the e-reader version of the Voice Bible—a new translation designed for people like him. People who had no real experience with Scripture. He could read it any time he wanted right on his phone.

This morning he'd read the book of James.

Don't just be hearers of the Word of God. Be doers. The message stayed with him still.

The first chapter was the reason he'd asked Tyler to go with him to give blood today. It wasn't enough to wish people well and offer a quick prayer. God's people needed to act. Matthew West had a song about it. "Do Something."

He rested his forearms on his thighs and stared out at the stadium. His surface wound from the bullet was healing. One day soon the place would be packed, people cheering on his team, screaming his name. But what did they know of Marcus Dillinger? Sure, he was clean-cut. He stayed away from drugs and drinking and he'd given a bunch of money to open a youth center for kids in the inner city.

But what about his faith?

The question had plagued Marcus many nights, even since he'd known for sure that God was working in his life, that God had answered his challenge back in October. Okay, so he believed. So he did a few good things for the community—if they actually were good.

Did that mean he was a Christian?

Marcus breathed in sharply through his nose and sat up straighter. *God, I'm here . . . What do You want from me?*

No answer whispered across his heart. But another Bible verse came to mind. The one he'd read yesterday in Romans, chapter ten. He pulled out his phone and read it again. *Romans 10:9—So if you believe deep in your heart that God raised Jesus from the pit of death and if you voice your allegiance by confessing the truth that "Jesus is Lord," then you will be saved!*

He had heard people pray for salvation before, but sitting here, the winter breeze cool against his face, Marcus wasn't sure he'd ever actually done that. He'd attended house church at the Waynes' week after week. But even though he appreciated the stories and the teaching, he'd never made the message personal.

Never made that sort of a deal with Jesus.

Marcus lifted his eyes to the sky and like a parade, he could see all the girls. All the careless nights. The reason he could never stand before Mary Catherine as anything but her friend. *Lord, I know I already apologized for those times. For who I was back then. But where do I go from here? What happens now?* He thought about his anger toward the shooter, the futility and impatience that had consumed him most hours since Jalen had been shot. *I guess sin can be more than sleeping around. I'm sorry for my attitude, too.*

Suddenly, there in the quiet of the empty stadium, he could feel the

presence of God. Marcus did the most natural thing he could do. He lifted his hands toward heaven and prayed.

The verse from Romans played again in his mind. This time he spoke out loud. “Father, would You get rid of the filth in my heart, please? I believe in You.”

The cool breeze picked up speed, sending a low whistling sound through the stadium.

Marcus wasn’t finished. “From the depth of my heart, Jesus, I believe You are God and that You died on the cross and were raised to life for me.” His words were quiet but powerful. “I want You to be with me. I want to be saved. I am nothing without You. I mean it.” Marcus felt tears on his cheeks. “Even if I were the only person on earth You would’ve died anyway. So here’s my confession, Father. Jesus is Lord. Now and forever.”

He lowered his hands and dragged them across his cheeks. There was no describing the feeling inside him. He felt whole and clean and full of light. Of course he would mess up again. He could never be perfect. But at least now he had assurance. If the bullet hit him next time, he’d go from life on earth to life in heaven.

Because the Bible said so.

But there was something else. He’d learned last week at the Waynes’ that the Book of Acts talked about times when people got baptized. He spent the next half hour searching for the word *baptism* in his Voice Bible app. Every time, it seemed like people made the decision to get baptized after they decided to believe in Jesus for salvation.

Believe *and* be baptized. That’s what the Bible said.

He remembered the beach trip in the morning. Could he be baptized then? Would that even be possible? Without hesitating he called Coach Wayne. “Coach. It’s Marcus.”

“Hey!” The man sounded happy, the way he usually sounded. “I’ve been meaning to call you. How’s the little boy doing?”

“Still hanging in there. No change.” Marcus felt a ripple of discouragement. “His mother’s asking everyone to pray.”

“I saw that on Twitter. Almost a hundred and fifty thousand people have retweeted it. That’s incredible.”

That many? Gratitude filled his heart. Who knew where the request would go from here? But he’d done what Shamika had asked and now—with so little effort—people were praying. Marcus drew a breath and tried to focus. “I’m calling you for a couple of reasons.”

“Go ahead.” There was the sound of a closing door. “I just stepped outside. What’s on your mind?”

“First . . .” Marcus wasn’t even sure how to explain what had just happened. “I’m here at the stadium by myself. I just gave my life to Jesus. Like for the first time. For real.”

“Marcus! That’s amazing!” Deep emotion came across in Coach Wayne’s voice. “Rhonda and I have been praying for that. Actually, I was going to pull you aside this Sunday after church and ask you where you were at in your faith journey.”

“Now you know.” Marcus laughed. “I’ve been reading the Voice Bible. I love it. Everything’s so clear. Like God’s speaking straight to me.”

“Incredible, right?”

They talked a few more minutes about Scripture and how it was God’s Word. God-breathed. But there was more Marcus needed to talk to the man about. He tried to find the right words. “Coach . . . something else. About Shelly.”

“Yes.” His voice grew more pensive. “I was going to talk to you about her, too.”

Marcus stood and paced down the empty row and back. How was he supposed to say this? “I’m planning to talk to her later tonight. It’s just not . . . it’s not working out with the two of us.” He paused. “I’m sorry, Coach, I really didn’t mean to get this involved and now . . . I’m just so sorry.”

For a moment there was only silence on the line. Marcus felt a pit in his stomach. Was his coach angry with him? If so, what could he do to make things right? He was about to offer another apology when he heard a light laugh coming from the man.

“I think you read me all wrong.” Coach Wayne sounded almost relieved. “I was going to warn you about her. She’s always been a little wild. Having her around more lately hasn’t been good for our own daughter.” He laughed again. “I was going to ask if you and Shelly would do your visiting outside of our home. Seriously.”

Relief washed over him. He’d worried about this for nothing. “She looks for trouble, that’s for sure.”

“She’s my niece, and I pray for her. One of these days something will get her attention and she’ll need more than her good looks to get by.” This time there was no denying the approval in Coach’s voice. “Good decision, Marcus. You don’t need that sort of distraction.”

“Definitely not.” Marcus realized he’d been holding his breath. He exhaled and sat back down. “So I guess that’s two good choices tonight.”

“Yes.” His voice became more serious. “I know it won’t be easy, talking to Shelly. But she’ll understand. She’s had lots of boyfriends.”

“Thanks, Coach. There’s one more thing.” Marcus smiled. “If you’re not

busy tomorrow around nine thirty, could you meet us at Zuma Beach? Me and Tyler and Sami and Mary Catherine?"

"Sounds fun." There was a smile in Coach Wayne's voice. "Just because?"

"Because I want to get baptized. I wondered if you'd do the honors."

Again there was silence for several seconds. Marcus could practically see the man's face when he finally spoke. "It would be one of the greatest honors of my life, Marcus. Rhonda and I will be there. The kids, too."

The call ended and Marcus stared at the sky, soaking in the love and joy and peace that surrounded him. Mary Catherine would want to be there for his baptism. So would the others. There would be no fanfare, no media, no fear of bullets flying.

Just him and his closest friends and the greatest decision Marcus had ever made.

The decision to follow Jesus.

Hoofstuk 19

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M

arcus en Tyler kry mekaar daardie middag by die hospitaal om bloed te skenk. Hulle weet nie of hul bloed vir Jalen gebruik sal kan word nie, maar dit maak nie saak nie. Iemand sal dit wel nodig hê. Terwyl hulle sit en wag, kom Charlie Kent ingestap.

'Ons het vandag nog twee skietslagoffers ingebring. Hulle sal lewe, maar dit gaan nie goed met hulle nie.' Hy lyk moeg. 'Ek het lanklaas soveel geweld gesien.'

Hy gaan sit regoor Marcus en Tyler. 'Ons het 'n uur gelede 'n man naby die Dodgers se stadion gearresteer. Die besigheid kon baie anders uitgedraai het.'

Marcus is bly hy is nie in Charlie Kent se skoene nie. 'Wat het gebeur?'

''n Polisieman van 'n ander distrik was in die park op een van die wandelpaadjes. Hy het 'n man in die bosse gewaar, en hom herken – hy is een van die mense wat ons soek. Gebel en bystand aangevra, en twee van ons manne het hom gearresteer.' Offisier Kent skud sy kop. 'Die man word gesoek vir meer as een moord, verkragting, aanranding. Hy het 'n jaar gelede uit 'n tronk in Noord-Kalifornië ontsnap.'

Marcus ervaar 'n tevredenheid. 'Ek is bly julle kon hom arresteer.'

'Wat het hy daar in die park gesoek?' Dit lyk asof die storie Tyler ook

aangryp.

‘Dis die ontstellende deel. Daar was twee meisies op die paadjie. Hulle sou ’n paar minute later by hom verby geloop het. Ons dink hy het vir hulle staan en wag, en dat hy hulle wou aanval.’

Skielik val al die stukkies inmekaar, en Marcus voel asof hy val, asof hy nie sy voete onder hom kan voel nie. ‘Sê net weer ... watter park was dit?’

Die een naby die Dodgers se stadion.’ Offisier Kent staan op. ‘Het julle vir die klein seuntjie kom kuier?’

‘Ja.’ Marcus staan op en skud die polisieman se hand. Was die twee meisies in die park Mary Catherine en Lexy? Hy probeer fokus op Charlie Kent se vraag. ‘Ons wil ook sommer bloed skenk. Dit is ten minste iets wat ons kan doen.’

Kent skud ook Tyler se hand. ‘Ja, ons voel almal so. Probeer doen wat ons kan.’ Hy raak aan sy pet. ‘Sien julle môre aand vir die opleiding.’

‘Ons sien daarna uit.’ Marcus gaan stadig sit. Sy hart klop so hard dat dit voel asof sy ribbes gaan breek.

Tyler staar hom aan. ‘Alles reg?’

‘Die park.’ Marcus kan nie sy hart tot bedaring bring nie. ‘Dis waar Mary Catherine met Lexy gaan stap het.’

Skielik sien Tyler ook die implikasies van Marcus se woorde. ‘Dink jy hulle was ...’

‘Dis moontlik.’ Hy bedek sy gesig vir ’n paar oomblikke met sy hande, dan kyk hy op. ‘Ek moes saamgegaan het. Al het sy die ding van net meisies gehad. Die stad is nie veilig nie.’

‘Stuur vir Mary Catherine ’n SMS en hoor of alles reg is.’

Maar Marcus wil haar stem hoor. Hy haal sy selfoon uit en tik haar nommer in. Sy antwoord byna dadelik.

‘Hallo?’

‘Waar is jy?’ Sy stem klink heeltemal te hard en te intens. Hy dwing homself om te kalm. Waar sy ook al is, sy klink kalm.

‘Ek het nou net vir Lexy by haar huis afgelaai.’ Hy kan hoor dat Mary Catherine verbaas is oor sy stemtoon. ‘Is iets fout?’

Marcus sit sy ander hand teen sy voorkop en blaas sy asem stadig uit. *Bedaar*, sê hy vir homself. ‘Het julle na die park toe gegaan soos jy gesê het?’

‘Ja. Dit was nie watwonders nie, maar dis ten minste ’n begin. Sy is ’n tawwe enetjie.’ Mary Catherine se stem klink onseker. ‘Jy klink ontsteld. Wat is dit?’

‘Het julle die polisie daar raakgeloop?’

‘Wel, noudat jy vra, ja.’ Mary Catherine huiwer. ‘Twee polisiemanne het ’n man gearresteer op die paadjie waar ons wou loop. Dit was nogal grillerig.’

Marcus staan op en loop vinnig heen en weer deur die wagkamer. ‘Dit was ’n baie gevaarlike man. Ek het nou net met offisier Kent gesels en hy sê ... die

man het julle moontlik ingewag.’

‘Vir ons?’ Mary Catherine klink nou vir die eerste keer bang.

‘Moontlik.’ Marcus Dillinger kan dit nie glo nie. Mary Catherine en Lexy was in gevaar, en as iets gebeur het ... hy wil liever nie daaraan dink nie. ‘Die Here was by julle. Hy het julle beskerm.’

‘Die polisiemanne het niks gesê nie.’ Mary Catherine se stem klink gespanne. ‘As Lexy iets moes oorkom, sou ek myself nooit vergewe het nie. Maar ons het niks vermoed nie.’

‘Toemaar, dis nou verby. Dis net ... asseblief, Mary Catherine, wees versigtig. Jy moet liever toelaat dat ek saamkom.’ Hy leun terug. Dis wonderlik om haar stem te hoor en te weet sy makeer niks. Hy probeer ’n ligter aanslag. ‘Onthou volgende keer.’

‘Jy’s reg.’ Haar stem klink warm. ‘Ek is jammer. Ek moes jou nie so vinnig uitgesluit het nie.’

‘Ons is saam in hierdie vrywilliger-ding.’ Hy leun met sy elmboë op sy knieë. ‘Laat my toe om te help, asseblief?’

‘Goed.’ Vir die eerste keer vandat sy die telefoon geantwoord het, hoor hy haar glimlag. ‘Waar is jy?’

‘By die hospitaal.’ Hy hou nie van naalde wat in hom steek nie, maar dis vir ’n goeie saak. ‘Ek en Tyler wil bloed skenk.’

‘Fantasties.’ Haar stem is sag en vriendelik. ‘Hoe gaan dit met Jalen?’

‘Min of meer dieselfde.’ Marcus is diep onder die indruk van die erns van die kind se situasie. ‘Ons gaan netnou na Shamika toe.’

‘Ek kom ook later.’ Sy klink weer soos haar ou self. Die vrees van netnou is weg. ‘Maar julle sal dan seker al weg wees.’

‘Jy is al weer besig om my te vermy.’ Hy lag saggies. ‘Toemaar, ek terg net.’ Hy bly ’n rukkie stil. ‘Wees versigtig, Mary Catherine. Asseblief.’

‘Ek sal.’

Hy beëindig die oproep, want hy en Tyler word nader geroep. Hulle gaan lê langs mekaar en kyk kort voor lank hoe die sakkies stadig vol bloed loop.

‘Ek hou nie van naalde wat in my steek nie.’ Marcus moet wegkyk van die een in sy arm. ‘Ek doen dit net omdat hulle sê dit kan goed doen aan kinders soos Jalen.’

‘Jy dink so?’ Tyler beweeg sy arm en frons van die skielike pyn. ‘Hulle gaan dit waarskynlik gebruik om die twee bendeledede se lewens te red, die twee wat pas geskiet is.’

Marcus het nie daaraan gedink nie. Hy hou nie van die gedagte nie. Gee hy dalk bloed vir twee bendeledede wat niks daarvan dink om ander mense te skiet nie? Sodat hulle kan teruggaan en mekaar verder vol gate skiet? Hy byt op sy tande en probeer om nie daaraan te dink nie.

‘Doen jy en Sami iets hierdie naweek?’ Hy sit sy arm onder sy kop sodat hy Tyler beter kan sien. ‘Behalwe die tronktoer natuurlik.’

Tyler lag, maar klink meer bekommerd as vrolik. ‘Ek dink ons sal seker pootuit wees na die toer.’

‘Seker.’ Al die bloedskenk en tronktoere sal hulle sekerlik uitput: Tyler is reg. ‘Haai, amper vergeet ek.’ Tyler kyk na hom. ‘Sami en Mary Catherine gaan môreoggend vroeg strand toe. Dit gaan glo weer so lekker warm wees soos laas naweek.’

‘Klink lekker.’ Hy gee ’n kortaf laggie. ‘Mary Catherine het niks daarvan gesê nie.’

‘Wel, Sami het. Sy het ons twee saamgenooi.’

‘Regtig?’ Marcus glimlag. ‘Weet Mary Catherine sy het dit gedoen?’

‘Komaan, Dillinger,’ lag Tyler. ‘Jy dink seker nie regtig Mary Catherine probeer jou vermy nie. Sy het dan ingestem om saam met jou in die tronkprogram te werk, of hoe?’

‘Wel, sy het nie juis ’n keuse gehad nie.’ Marcus kyk ondersoekend na Tyler.

‘Onthou jy? Daardie polisieman het haar gevra om my te vra.’

‘Wel ... moenie vergeet dat sy dalk nie weet wat met jou en Shelly aangaan nie.’

Marcus sug. ‘Ja, wel. Oor Shelly.’ Hy kyk by die venster uit en dink aan die hele situasie. ‘Ek moet met Ollie Wayne praat.’

‘Hoekom?’ Tyler trek ’n gesig. ‘Hy sal nie omgee as die ding tussen jou en Shelly nie uitwerk nie.’

‘Sy is darem sy niggie.’ Marcus voel vasgekeer. ‘Ek moes nooit ingestem het om haar te bel nie.’

Tyler wag, kyk net veelseggend na hom. ‘Wel, jy sal na die een of ander kant toe moet besluit. Die aand in die restaurant was ’n fiasko.’

Hul sakkies is vol, en hulle word na die tafel met versnaperings gestuur. Marcus sluk sy lemoensap en koekies vinnig weg. Hy staan liewer na aan die muur en wag tot hy minder lighoofdig voel, maar Tyler lyk doodrustig. ‘Lewe net ’n paar maande met ’n arm wat halfpad af is, dan sal bloedskenk soos ’n wandeling in die park voel.’

Die twee stap lag-lag uit, maar in die hysbak op pad na die hoërsorg-eenheid raak hulle stil. ‘Ek bid die hele tyd.’ Tyler haal diep asem toe hulle die verpleegsters se diensstasie nader. ‘Dat die Here die kind wakkermaak.’

Tyler het ingestem dat Marcus eerste sal ingaan. Marcus voel weer die bekende seer in sy hart toe hy by die kamer kom. Die deur staan oop en hy sien Shamika langs haar seun sit. Sy hou sy hand vas en praat saggies met hom. Sy kyk op toe Marcus in die deur gaan staan.

‘Kom in. Asseblief.’ Sy staan op en gee hom ’n drukkie. ‘Dankie dat jy

gekom het.'

'Hoe gaan dit met hom?' Marcus loop na die bed toe en sit sy hand oor die seun se klein handjie. Hy kyk na die masjiene wat tik en piep, net soos altyd.

'Hy is nog in 'n koma.' 'n Mens kan sien dat Shamika baie gehuil het. 'Ek smeeek God om hom vandag wakker te maak.' Sy bly stil en haar stem raak moedeloos. 'Die dokters sê dit moet gou gebeur. Anders gaan hy dalk breinskade hê.'

Die erns van die hele situasie lê swaar op Marcus se skouers. Dis asof dit al die lug uit die vertrek suig. Jalen was so vol vertroue, so gewillig om te help.

'Is daar iets wat ek kan doen? Het jy hulp nodig?'

'Vra mense om te bid. Asseblief.' Haar oë word weer vol trane. 'Ek wil hê die Here moet weet ek gee nie moed op nie.'

Marcus knik. 'Ek kan dit doen. Ek sal vir almal sê.' Hy moet die nuus versprei. Natuurlik bid hy en sy vriende. Maar hy het niemand anders gevra nie. Meer as 'n halfmiljoen mense volg hom op Twitter, en daar het hy ook nie 'n woord gesê nie. Hy frons. 'Ek belowe, Shamika. Ek sal mense vra om vir jou seun te bid.'

~

Die twee is stil toe hulle die hospitaal verlaat en na die parkeerarea stap. Marcus dink die hele tyd aan Twitter. Die hele Los Angeles weet hy is geskiet. Dit was selfs op die grootste koerant se voorblad. Almal wat hom op Twitter volg, weet dus reeds dat hy die slagoffer van bendegegeweld was as gevolg van sy pogings om 'n jeugsentrum op die been te bring.

Waarom het hy niemand gevra om vir Jalen te bid nie?

'Ek het 'n plan.' Marcus haal sy selfoon uit. 'Is jy nog op Twitter?'

'Ja.' Tyler het nog nie die motor aangeskakel nie. Hy haal sy selfoon uit sy sak en kyk daarna. 'Ek het nog nie na enige sosiale media gekyk vandat ek hier in Los Angeles aangekom het nie.'

'Miskien is dit nou tyd om te begin.' Marcus maak die Twitter-app oop. 'Jy het 140 karakters waarmee jy mense kan vra om vir Jalen te bid. Kom ons doen dit.'

Marcus se twiet is eenvoudig.

'n Seun veg om sy lewe in 'n hospitaal in die stad. Hy het die koeël gekry wat vir my bedoel was. Vra God vir 'n wonderwerk. #bidvirJalen.

Marcus lees die woorde en kyk by die venster uit. *Vergewe my dat ek dit nie lankal gedoen het nie. Ek is nuut in hierdie ding. En ... help asseblief vir Jalen. Hy het U nodig, Here.*

Hy stuur die twiet en kyk na Tyler. 'Weg is hy.'

'Myne ook.' Tyler sit sy selfoon weer in sy sak. 'Kom ons kyk wat gebeur

nou.'

~

Hulle koop hamburgers by die restaurant oorkant die straat en gesels oor Shamika, Jalen en die jeugsentrum terwyl hulle dit eet. En of hulle meer probleme het as wat hulle kan hanteer.

Dit voel vir Marcus asof hulle beslis aan die verdrink is.

Halfpad deur die ete kyk Marcus na sy selfoon. 'Liewe land, kyk hier!' Hy kan dit nie glo nie. 'Amper 'n honderd duisend her-twiets, en dit binne twintig minute.'

Tyler het net so 'n goeie reaksie gekry. Marcus staar na sy selfoon en kry 'n knop in sy keel. Hierdie gebaar beteken vir hom meer as wat sy aanhangers ooit sal weet. En toe hy die kommentaar lees, sien hy baie beloftes van gebede. Net toe dit vir hom begin lyk asof geweld die norm is en niemand vir mekaar omgee nie, kry hy die bewys dat daar beslis mense is wat wel omgee. Dit is die inspuiting van hoop wat hy nodig gehad het, veral omdat hy van plan is om by die jeugsentrum aan te doen en te sien hoe dit daar gaan. Hy het 'n week gelede 'n volttydse direkteur aangestel, wat gerapporteer het dat alles kalm verloop.

Marcus wil natuurlik meer as kalm sien. Maar in die lig van die vorige week se gebeure is kalm beslis vordering.

Toe hulle na hul motors stap, gee Tyler hom 'n ligte hou teen die arm. 'Jy gaan môreoggend saam strand toe, hoor.' Hy sit sy selfoon weg. 'Geen verskonings word aanvaar nie!'

Tyler en Marcus bly in dieselfde woonstel; dit sal maklik wees om saam te ry. Maar Marcus is nie seker dat dit 'n goeie ding is nie. 'Iemand moet eers vir Mary Catherine vra.'

'Sami het gesê dis in die haak.' Tyler hou sy hande in die lug. 'Komaan, Marcus. Moenie toelaat dat die meisiekind jou intimideer nie.'

'Ek sal sien.' Marcus gooi sy sleutels in die lug en vang hulle weer. 'Ek sal daaroor dink.'

'Ons is mos vriende, of hoe? Môreoggend 09:00.'

Wat Tyler betref, is die saak afgehandel.

Marcus ry na die jeugsentrum toe, en die hele tyd wonder hy of hy moet gaan. Hy dink sonder ophou aan Mary Catherine en hy tel die ure tot hy haar weer sal sien. Maar om saam met Tyler strand toe te gaan voel 'n bietjie voor op die wa. Mary Catherine het hom nie genooi nie, al sê Tyler wat.

Hy probeer die gedagte uit sy kop kry. By die sentrum gaan hy met die nuwe direkteur praat. Sy verslag is goed. Kinders kom in die middag hulp soek met hul huiswerk, en kom nog elke aand basketbal speel. Baie het gevra of daar

Dinsdagaand weer pizza sal wees.

‘’n Mens sou dink die geskiet sou hulle weghou.’ Marcus verstaan nog nie die lewe op die strate nie.

‘Dit het geen invloed nie.’ Die direkteur was voorheen ’n voetbalafrigter by ’n hoërskool in die area. Hy is net die regte persoon om die jeugsentrum te bestuur. ‘Hierdie kinders dink niks van ’n skietery nie. Hulle sien dit heeltemal anders as ek en jy.’

Hul uitsiglose lewe bly Marcus by. Hy wou huis toe gaan en weer gaan oefen voordat hy gaan slaap, maar daar is te veel gedagtes wat deur sy kop maal.

Hy ry na die Dodgers se stadion toe.

Dit is een van die dae tyd vir die lente-oefenprogram. En na ’n paar maande by die Camelback-landgoed in Arizona begin die speelseisoen. Hy is weer die eerste gooier, dus sal hy min tyd hê om saam met Mary Catherine te kuier.

Die stadion is leeg, soos hy verwag het dit op ’n Donderdagaand in Januarie sal wees. Marcus gebruik sy sleutel om in te kom en gaan sit op ’n sitplek in een van die boonste rye van die pawiljoen. Die son is besig om onder te gaan en kleur die lug pienk en blou.

Iets aan hierdie plek help hom altyd om te dink. Om sy prioriteite reg te kry. Sedert die aand van sy stappie saam met Mary Catherine lees hy gereeld in die Bybel. Hy het vir hom ’n e-boek weergawe van die Bybel gekry en dit op sy selfoon gelaai. Nou kan hy sy Bybel enige tyd en plek lees.

Vanoggend het hy uit Jakobus 1 gelees.

Word daders van die woord en nie net hoorders wat julleself bedrieg nie.

Dit was die rede waarom hy Tyler gevra het om saam met hom te gaan bloed skenk. Dit is nie genoeg om te wens mense word gesond en net vir hulle te bid nie. God se volgelinge moet die daad by die woord voeg.

Hy laat sy arms op sy bene rus en staar oor die stadion. Die koeëlwond in sy been is gesond. Een van die dae gaan die plek weer gepak wees, gaan mense sy span aanmoedig en sy naam uitskree. Maar wat weet hulle van Marcus Dillinger? Ja, sy lewe is skoon. Hy bly weg van dwelms en alkohol en hy het ’n klomp geld gegee om ’n jeugsentrum vir die kinders in die gheto’s op die been te bring.

Maar wat van sy geloof?

Die vraag pla hom al ’n hele ruk, vandat hy agtergekom het dat God in sy lewe werk. Toe God destyds in Oktober sy gebed verhoor het. Goed. Hy glo in God. Hy doen ’n paar goeie dinge vir die gemeenskap – as dit ooit goeie dinge is.

Maar beteken dit hy is ’n Christen?

Marcus haal diep asem en sit regop. *Here, hier is ek ... wat verlang U van my?*

Geen antwoord kom in sy hart op nie. Maar hy dink aan 'n teksvers, die een wat hy gister in Romeine 10 gelees het. Hy haal sy selfoon uit en lees weer vers 9: *As jy met jou mond die Here Jesus bely en met jou hart glo dat God Hom uit die dode opgewek het, sal jy gered word.*

Marcus het al gehoor dat mense om redding bid, maar nou, hier waar hy op die pawiljoen sit met die winterwind koud op sy gesig, dink hy nie hy het dit al ooit self gedoen nie. Hy gaan al vir 'n hele ruk na die Waynes se huiskerk. Maar alhoewel hy dit baie geniet het, het hy nog nie die boodskap vir hom persoonlik aanvaar nie.

Hy het nog nooit 'n ooreenkoms met Jesus aangegaan nie.

Marcus kyk op na die lug en daar voor hom sien hy al die meisies, soos 'n skoonheidsparade. Al die sorgelose nagte. Die rede waarom hy nooit voor Mary Catherine sal kan staan as enige iets anders as 'n vriend nie. *Here, ek weet ek het al vergifnis daarvoor gevra, vir daardie tydperk in my lewe – vir wie ek toe was. Maar wat nou? Wat gebeur volgende?* Hy dink aan sy woede teenoor die skietser, die gevoel van sinloosheid en ongeduld wat hom beet gepak het sedert Jalen geskiet is. *Sonde is seker meer as om rond te slaap, Here. Ek bely my negatiewe houding ook.*

Skielik voel hy die teenwoordigheid van God aan in die stil, leë stadion. En hy doen iets wat so natuurlik soos asemhaal voel. Hy lig sy hande op en bid.

Die teksvers uit Romeine kom weer in sy gedagtes op. Hierdie keer bid hy hardop: 'Vader, sal U asseblief al die sonde in my hart wegneem? Ek glo in U.'

Die koel briesie begin sterker waai, sodat 'n sagte geruis in die stadion hoorbaar word.

Maar Marcus is nog nie klaar nie. 'Here Jesus, ek glo uit die diepte van my hart dat U God is en dat U aan die kruis gesterf het en uit die dode opgewek is, vir my.' Sy woorde is sag, maar hy sê dit sonder skroom. 'Ek wil hê dat U in my lewe sal wees. Ek wil gered wees. Ek is niks sonder U nie. Ek bedoel dit.' Marcus voel die trane op sy wange. 'Al was ek die enigste persoon op aarde, sou U nog vir my gesterf het. Ek bely dit sodat U dit kan hoor, Vader. Jesus is die Here. Nou en vir ewig.'

Hy laat sak sy hande en vee sy wange af. Die gevoel in hom is onbeskryflik. Hy voel heel en skoon en vol lig. Natuurlik gaan hy weer sonde doen. Hy is nie volmaak nie. Maar nou het hy ten minste die versekering van verlossing. As 'n koeël hom volgende keer tréf, sal hy van hierdie wêreld af na 'n lewe in die hemel gaan.

Omdat die Bybel so sê.

Maar daar is nog iets. Hy het verlede week by die Waynes geleer dat die boek Handelingte oor die doop praat, en hy besluit om die woord 'doop' met sy

Bybel-app op te soek. Dit lyk vir hom asof mense elke keer besluit het om hulle te laat doop nadat hulle besluit het om Jesus te volg.

Glo en laat jou doop. Dit is wat hy lees.

Hy dink skielik aan die uitstappie strand toe. Kan hy dan gedoop word? Is so iets moontlik? Sonder om verder daaroor te dink, bel hy vir Ollie Wayne. 'Hallo. Dis Marcus.'

'Hallo!' Ollie klink gelukkig. Soos gewoonlik. 'Ek wou jou al bel. Hoe gaan dit met die seuntjie?'

'Nog dieselfde. Geen verandering nie.' Marcus voel 'n bietjie mismoedig toe hy daaraan dink. 'Sy ma vra almal om vir hom te bid.'

'Ek het op Twitter gesien, ja. Amper 'n honderd en vyftig duisend mense het reageer. Dit is ongelooflik.'

So veel mense? Marcus voel dankbaar. Wie weet waar sy versoek nie oral heengaan nie? Hy het net gedoen wat Shamika gevra het en nou – na so min moeite van sy kant af – bid mense. Marcus haal asem en probeer fokus. 'Ek wil 'n paar dinge vra.'

'Vra gerus.' Marcus hoor 'n deur toegaan. 'Ek het gou uitgekom. Wat het jy op die hart?'

'Eerstens ...' Marcus is nie seker hoe om te verduidelik wat pas gebeur het nie. 'Ek is hier by die stadion. Ek het nou net my lewe vir Jesus gegee. Soos vir die eerste keer. Maar ek bedoel dit.'

'Marcus! Dis wonderlik!' 'n Mens kan die emosie in die afrigter se stem hoor. 'Ek en Rhonda het daarvoor gebid. Om die waarheid te sê, ek was van plan om jou Sondag te vra waar jy jou op die geloofspad bevind.'

'Wel, nou weet jy.' Marcus lag. 'Ek lees die Bybel op my selfoon. Ek hou daarvan. Alles is so duidelik. Asof die Here direk met my praat.'

'Dis ongelooflik, nè?'

Hulle praat 'n paar minute oor die Bybel en dat dit God se Woord is. Deur God self geïnspireer. Maar daar is nog 'n paar dinge waaroor Marcus wil gesels. Hy probeer die regte woorde vind. 'Ollie ... daar is nog iets. Shelly.'

'Ja.' Sy stem klink nadenkend. 'Ek wou met jou oor haar ook gesels.'

Marcus staan op en begin heen en weer loop. Hoe sê 'n mens dit? 'Ek beplan om later vanaand met haar te praat. Dis net ... die ding tussen ons werk nie uit nie.' Hy bly 'n rukkie stil. 'Ek is jammer. Ek was nie van plan om so betrokke by haar te raak nie en nou ... ek is baie jammer.'

Daar is 'n oomblik lank stilte. Marcus voel hoe sy maag op 'n knop trek. Is sy afrigter baie kwaad vir hom? Hoe gaan hy dit regkry om hul verhouding te herstel? Hy wil net nog 'n keer om verskoning vra toe hy 'n sagte lag hoor.

'Ek dink jy lees my heeltemal verkeerd.' Ollie Wayne klink sowaar verlig. 'Ek wou jou waarsku oor 'n verhouding met haar. Sy was nog altyd 'n bietjie

wild. Om haar in die rondte hê is ook nie goed vir ons dogter nie.’ Hy lag weer. ‘Ek wou eintlik vir jou vra om nie meer met Shelly na ons huis toe te kom nie. Regtig.’

Die verligting spoel oor hom. Hy was verniet bekommerd. ‘Sy soek moeilikheid, dis seker.’

‘Sy is my niggie, en ek bid vir haar. Ek is seker iets sal gebeur wat haar sal wys sy het meer as haar mooi gesiggie nodig om oor die weg te kom. Ek dink jy het ’n goeie besluit geneem, Marcus. Jy het nie daardie soort afleiding nodig nie.’ Hierdie keer is die goedkeuring in sy stem duidelik.

‘Nee, ek stem saam.’ Marcus besef hy hou sy asem op. Hy ontspan doelbewus en blaas sy asem stadig uit. ‘Dit klink my ek het vanaand twee goeie besluite geneem.’

‘Ja.’ Ollie se stem is ernstig. ‘Ek weet dit gaan nie maklik wees om met Shelly te praat nie. Maar sy sal verstaan. Sy het al baie mansvriende gehad.’

‘Dankie! Nou nog net een ding.’ Marcus glimlag. ‘Kan jy my môreoggend so halftien se kant op die strand kry? Vir my en Tyler, Sami en Mary Catherine?’

‘Klink lekker.’ Daar is ’n glimlag in Ollie Wayne se stem. ‘Is daar ’n rede vir die uitnodiging?’

‘Ek wil graag gedoop word. Ek het gewonder of jy dit sal doen.’

Daar is weer ’n langerige stilte. Maar Marcus hoor presies wat Ollie dink toe hy weer praat. ‘Dit sal vir my ’n baie groot eer wees, Marcus. Ek en Rhonda sal beslis daar wees. Die kinders ook.’

Hulle groet en Marcus sit en kyk op na die hemelruim en ervaar dat liefde en vrede en vreugde hom omring. Mary Catherine sal die doop wil bywoon. Die ander ook. Daar sal nie ’n drama wees nie, nie media nie, geen koeëls nie.

Net hy en sy beste vriende en die belangrikste besluit wat Marcus nog in sy lewe geneem het.

Sy besluit om Jesus te volg.

20



THE SUN WAS BRIGHT in the early Friday morning sky by the time Aspyr took her place at the short block wall that separated Zuma Beach from the parking lot. She watched Mary Catherine drive her Hyundai up and park

near the wall.

Help me, Father. The timing has to be perfect.

She could picture her angel team in heaven, watching, all of them praying. Aspyr could feel their support.

Mary Catherine and Sami climbed out of the car and grabbed boogie boards, towels, and a few bags. Invisible and silent, Aspyr stayed with them as they headed down the sand toward the water. Her job was very specific. It would be nearly impossible to pull it off without being noticed.

The girls set up ten yards from the water, spreading their towels out on the sand. Aspyr watched closely, never taking her eyes off Mary Catherine. Finally it happened. Mary Catherine took her cell phone from her pocket and checked it.

Aspyr knew why. She was expecting two very important phone calls. One from her mother—who had called Mary Catherine the night before to tell her the news that her father’s health was failing. Even though they were divorced, her parents cared about each other. Today the man was in a hospital in Nashville, where doctors were deciding whether he’d need lifesaving surgery.

The second call set to come in sometime this morning would be from Mary Catherine’s own doctor. He had studied the tests she’d had done over a week ago and now he had the results. Aspyr watched Mary Catherine turn the ringer on her phone all the way up. Then she set it near the bottom of her towel.

“What time will the others be here?” Mary Catherine checked the time on her phone. “It’s already nine.”

“About half an hour.” Sami was slipping her wetsuit on.

Good, Aspyr thought. She needed both girls to take to the water before the Wayne family and Marcus and Tyler arrived. Otherwise what she was about to do would be impossible.

Father, get them in the water. Please draw them in . . . I don’t have much time. Suddenly in the nearby waves, a pod of dolphins appeared, splashing and chattering among each other. Aspyr looked up to heaven and smiled. God was beyond creative. *Thank You, Lord.*

Mary Catherine noticed the dolphins. “Look!” She tossed her phone on the towel and grabbed her wetsuit from her bag. “Hurry! Maybe we can ride with them again.”

The girls hurried to finish getting dressed, grabbed their boards, and jogged to the surf. They jumped over the white water and made it out to the flat sea just before the breakers. The place where the dolphins were still tossing their heads and jumping through the waves.

Perfect. Aspyr slipped behind the closest lifeguard station and became a

jogger. Simple navy shorts and a white tank top. The most discreet jogging outfit she could think to wear. She pulled her hair back with a rubber band from her pocket and studied the scene. The sand felt wonderful on her feet—something angels only experienced on missions. Sand in heaven was different. Softer.

Aspyn scanned the beach. No one else was out here this early. The girls would have to stay distracted if she were going to pull this off. She took a deep breath and began jogging. She eased her way to the shore and started to close the forty-yard gap between her and the place where Mary Catherine's beach towel was set up.

Aspyn loved this feeling and hated it at the same time. The way her heart pounded was something intrinsically human. But the reason was terrifying. So much was at stake in the next few minutes.

Stay distracted. Please.

The dolphins weren't going anywhere. A few more seemed to join in, jumping and splashing not ten feet from where the girls were riding out on their boogie boards. *Hurry*, she told herself. *Get it done!*

Aspyn was closer now. She kept jogging, her face straight ahead as if she were any normal runner, enjoying any other day. As she neared Mary Catherine's towel she kept her eyes on the girls. They were still distracted by the dolphins, still too caught up in the moment to notice a jogger on the beach.

The plan could work. Aspyn reached the towel, stopped, and grabbed Mary Catherine's cell phone. In a quick move, she turned it off.

She had to hold the button a few seconds to see that the device was completely powered down. Then she dropped it back on the towel and resumed her jogging. Mary Catherine and Sami were facing the beach now, riding a wave into the shore, laughing and looking back at the dolphins.

They never once looked her way.

Aspyn kept jogging and a ways down the beach she met up with another jogger. Blond and tall. "That was textbook." Jag smiled at her. "And what about this sand?"

"I was just thinking that. So different than the sand in heaven." Aspyn could breathe again. "Rougher."

"Like all of earth." He lifted his face toward the sun as they jogged. "No time to waste, you know."

"Theme of this mission." She looked back. The girls were out near the waves again. Her action had gone completely undetected.

They jogged up the beach to the next lifeguard station, slipped behind it, and disappeared.

Jag was right. They couldn't waste a minute. They had a Nashville hospital

Hoofstuk 20

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D

ie son skyn helder toe Aspyn agter die muurtjie tussen die parkeerarea en die strand stelling inneem. Sy kyk hoe Mary Catherine aangery kom en naby die muur parkeer.

Help my, Vader. My tydsberekening moet perfek wees.

Sy sien die engele wat haar uit die hemel dophou en vir haar bid. Sy voel hul ondersteuning aan.

Mary Catherine en Sami klim uit en gryp hul lyfplanke, handdoeke en handsakke. Aspyn bly by hulle, onsigbaar en stil, toe hulle oor die sand na die water toe stap. Haar taak is baie spesifiek. En dit sal feitlik onmoontlik wees om dit te doen sonder om gesien te word.

Die meisies sprei hul handdoeke oop en gaan sit tien tree van die water af. Aspyn kyk stip na Mary Catherine. Uiteindelik gebeur die ding waarvoor sy wag. Mary Catherine haal haar selfoon uit haar sak en kyk daarna.

Aspyn weet hoekom. Sy verwag twee belangrike oproepe. Een van haar ma, wat Mary Catherine die vorige aand gebel het om te sê dat haar pa se gesondheid verswak het. Al is hulle geskei, gee hulle nog om vir mekaar. Vandag is Mary Catherine se pa in die hospitaal in Nashville waar die dokters moet besluit of 'n operasie noodsaaklik is.

Die tweede oproep sal van Mary Catherine se eie dokter wees. Hy het die toetse wat sy die vorige week ondergaan het, bestudeer en moet haar inlig wat die resultate daarvan is. Aspyn kyk hoe Mary Catherine die selfoon op sy hardste stel en dit dan langs haar neersit.

‘Wanneer kom die ander?’ Mary Catherine kyk hoe laat dit is. ‘Dis al 09:00.’

‘Hulle kom oor ’n halfuur.’ Sami is al besig om haar duikpak aan te trek.

Gaaf, dink Aspyn. Die twee meisies moet in die water wees voordat die Waynes, Marcus en Tyler kom. Anders sal sy nie kan doen wat sy moet doen nie.

Vader, laat hulle gou water toe gaan. Trek hulle in ... ek het nie baie tyd nie. Skielik verskyn ’n groep dolfyne net agter die branders, waar hulle duik en spring en met mekaar speel. Aspyn kyk op na die hemel en glimlag oor haar kreatiewe Vader. *Dankie, Here.*

Mary Catherine sien eerste die dolfyne. 'Kyk!' Sy spring op en gryp haar duikpak. 'Maak gou! Dalk ry hulle weer die branders saam met ons!'

Die meisies trek vinnig aan, gryp hul planke en draf springspring deur die branders tot by die plat water. Die dolfyne speel nog in die water. Hulle duik deur die branders.

Perfek. Aspyn verdwyn agter die strandwagte se hokkie en verskyn weer as 'n drawwer met 'n donkerblou kortbroek en wit toppie. Dis die onopvallendste draf-uitrusting waaraan sy kon dink. Sy maak haar hare met 'n rekkie was en bestudeer die toneel voor haar. Die sand voel wonderlik onder haar voete – iets wat engele net in menslike gestalte kan ervaar. Die sand in die hemel is anders. Sagter.

Aspyn kyk oor die strand. Daar is geen ander mense so vroeg in die oggend nie. Die meisies sal met die dolfyne besig moet bly as sy dit wil regkry. Sy haal diep asem en begin draf, al nader aan die plek waar Mary Catherine se handdoek op die sand lê.

Aspyn hou van die gevoel, maar ook nie. Die manier waarop haar hart teen haar ribbes hamer, is so menslik. Maar die rede is vreesaanjaend. Daar is soveel op die spel.

Moenie my raaksien nie. Asseblief.

Die dolfyne is nêrens heen op pad nie. Skaars tien tree van die meisies af spring hulle in die lug en val dan baldadig terug in die water. *Maak gou*, dink Aspyn. *Doen dit net!*

Aspyn is nou naby die handdoek. Sy hou aan draf, haar oë na vore gerig asof sy net 'n doodgewone drawwer op die strand is. Maar naby die handdoek kyk sy vinnig in die meisies se rigting. Hulle kyk die hele tyd na die dolfyne en sien glad nie die drawwer op die strand raak nie.

Die plan kan dalk net werk. Aspyn kom by die handdoek, gaan staan en tel die selfoon blitsvinnig op. Net so vinnig skakel sy dit af.

Sy moet die knoppie ingedruk hou om seker te maak die foon is heeltemal af. Toe laat sy dit weer op die handdoek val en draf verder. Mary Catherine en Sami is besig om 'n brander te ry, maar hulle lag en kyk om na die dolfyne.

Hulle kyk nie een keer in haar rigting nie.

Aspyn draf weg tot sy 'n entjie verder nog 'n drawwer teëkom. Hy is lank en blond. 'Dit het perfek afgeloop.' Jag glimlag met haar. 'En wat is dit met hierdie sand?'

'Ek dink nou net daaraan. Dis heeltemal anders as die hemel se sand.' Aspyn kan weer asemhaal. 'Growwer.'

'Net soos die hele aarde.' Hy kyk op na die son toe hulle verder draf. 'Ons het nie tyd om te mors nie, nè.'

'Die verhaal van hierdie sending.' Sy kyk terug. Die meisies is weer op pad

see in. Hulle het die drawwer glad nie raakgesien nie.

Die twee engele draf om die volgende lewensredderhokkie en verdwyn in die niet.

Jag is reg. Hulle moet gou maak om betyds by 'n sekere hospitaal in Nashville te kom.

21



THE WATER FELT WONDERFUL, cool and fresh and smooth against Mary Catherine's skin—the part not covered by her wetsuit. All that and a ride with the dolphins. Mary Catherine couldn't stop silently thanking God.

Sometime today she expected two difficult phone calls. One about her father's health. One about her own. But whatever news she received later, at least they'd had this time out here in the ocean. So far the morning couldn't have been more perfect.

And it was about to get better.

She and Sami had found out late last night that the guys were joining them along with the Wayne family for a very special reason. Marcus Dillinger was getting baptized. It was hard to believe that she had ever assumed Marcus to be shallow and predictable.

Nothing could've been further from the truth.

Marcus had a genuine love for people and a new faith vibrant and central to his life.

They rode another wave in and as Mary Catherine stood she saw the Wayne family and Marcus and Tyler walking in from the parking lot. She turned to Sami. "They're here!"

"This will be something." Sami stood and wiped the water from her face. "I'm so proud of Marcus. For wanting to do this."

"Me, too." They each held their boards under their arms and jogged back to their things. They pulled extra towels from their bags and dried off. They planned to go back in the water later, so they peeled their wetsuits only half off.

Mary Catherine had brought her Whole Foods "Live Life" sweatshirt for the occasion. Certainly baptism was a great time to think about living life. She

slipped it on and worked her fingers through her hair. She hoped the calls didn't come in during Marcus's moment.

But if they did, she'd have to take them. If her father was sicker, she was ready to get on a plane in a few hours and fly to Nashville. Even if it meant missing the Last Time In program. Marcus could handle it by himself if he had to.

The others walked up and Tyler slung his arm around Marcus's shoulders. "Could there be a better day for a beach baptism?"

Sami led the way to meet them. She hugged Marcus and then Tyler, and stayed there, her arm around his waist. "We're so happy for you, Marcus."

"I don't know what took me so long." He smiled and then turned to Mary Catherine. "God's been talking to me about a lot of things."

The Wayne family joined them—Ollie and Rhonda and their three kids. Shane and Sam wore bathing suits and sweatshirts. Sierra looked distant in jeans and a lightweight jacket.

Coach Wayne spoke first. "Thanks for inviting us. We couldn't miss this." He and Rhonda gave hugs to the others. Ollie patted Marcus on the back. "I remember when our kids were baptized. It's a big day."

Conversations started between Rhonda and Sami and Tyler, and at the same time Ollie stepped back to say a few words to his kids. In the fraction of a moment when no one else was talking to either of them, Marcus walked up to Mary Catherine. He wore a bathing suit and a T-shirt, and he stood so close their arms were touching.

Never mind the sweatshirt she was wearing. Mary Catherine could feel every inch of contact with him.

"Hey." He smiled at her. "Thanks for being here." His eyes held the familiar teasing. "I sort of intruded on your beach morning."

"Not at all." She felt her defenses falling. Every time she was near Marcus Dillinger the attraction was stronger. "I'm glad to be here. Really."

The others were talking and for that moment it was just Marcus and Mary Catherine. He glanced at her. "I ended things with Shelly last night."

Mary Catherine felt suddenly light-headed. Marcus had cut things off with Shelly? Had he really just said that? She shaded her eyes. "You broke up with her?"

"Technically we were never in a relationship." His voice was little more than a whisper. He allowed a sad chuckle. "But she thought we were."

He was trusting her with his heart. Whatever that meant, Mary Catherine loved the feeling. She kept her voice quiet. "How did she handle it?"

"Not well at first." The breeze off the ocean wrapped itself around their private conversation. "I think she understood eventually. I told her she was

too young and . . . well, truthfully I didn't see her the same way she saw me."

Mary Catherine winced. "Yeah, that would've been tough."

"She didn't hang around. Her friends were waiting for her back at her house." His smile melted her. "She'll be fine."

The feel of the ocean air, the sun on her shoulders, Marcus standing so close his words felt like velvet against her skin. All of it made Mary Catherine feel a little dizzy. She wasn't sure what to say.

"Anyway, I wanted you to know. That whole scene at the hospital the other night. The way she was at dinner with Sami and Tyler. I didn't want any of it. I needed to act on how I was feeling."

Mary Catherine reminded herself to breathe. "You seem happier."

"I am." He nodded toward the water. "And I'm about to make another great decision."

"Definitely." Mary Catherine wanted the moment to keep going. Even when standing here with him could never lead to anything. Feeling good wouldn't buy her a long life. "Thanks for telling me."

"I should've done it sooner." The sunlight caught his eyes. "Shelly wasn't real." He didn't blink, didn't take his eyes off hers. "Next time I won't settle for anything less."

Real. That was her word. Mary Catherine didn't want their alone time to end but the others were done visiting. They circled around, looking to Marcus. Ollie Wayne wore a bathing suit and a T-shirt. "Let's do this!"

"I'm ready!" Marcus whipped off his T-shirt and threw it on Mary Catherine's towel. The group walked close to the water, Mary Catherine near the back.

Her head was spinning. She must've told Sami a hundred times before she got the news about her heart, about her years being cut short. *Real* was all she wanted in a guy. Back when she thought she had forever.

He would have to be real in his beliefs, real in his character. *Real* in the way he treated her and everyone else.

And now Marcus wanted *that* in a girl. She wanted to pull Sami aside and ask if she had somehow told Marcus. How else could he have known how that one word would speak straight to her soul? But that was impossible. Sami didn't have heart-to-heart conversations with Marcus.

She felt her feet sink into the wet sand a few inches, but she didn't care. The feeling was a reminder that she was really here, this was really happening. That Marcus had just stood next to her and told her he was done with Shelly because he wanted someone real.

The wind settled down—as if all of heaven wanted to hear clearly what was about to happen. Mary Catherine stood with Sami and Tyler. Rhonda

Wayne and her kids stood nearby in another cluster, as all of them directed their attention to Ollie and Marcus. The two men walked out until they were waist deep.

Mary Catherine looked around, amazed. Not only was the beach quiet, it was empty. This divine moment was for them alone. She turned her eyes back to Marcus.

Ollie put his hand on Marcus's shoulder. "I've talked to Marcus Dillinger about Jesus for a long time." He hesitated, and after a few seconds it became obvious that the coach was struggling. Fighting to get the words past his emotions. Finally he coughed a little. "Anyway. This is a big day."

Marcus nodded. His smile was so big Mary Catherine could feel it all the way to the place where she stood.

"So you all know how this works." He looked at the rest of them on the beach. "Marcus asked Jesus to be his Savior. Now he wants to give a public demonstration of that faith. The symbol of dying to self and being raised to new life in Christ." Ollie looked at Marcus again. "You ready, man?"

"So ready!"

"What he means is, it's freezing out here without a wetsuit." Coach Ollie laughed. Then he turned his attention fully to the matter at hand. "Marcus, because you've placed your faith in Christ, and because you want to publicly declare your allegiance to Him, I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Marcus put his hand over his face, plugging his nose, and Ollie dipped him beneath the surface of the water.

As Marcus went under, Ollie continued. "Buried with Him in baptism." Ollie helped Marcus back to his feet. "Raised with Him to new life in the power of the Holy Spirit." He pulled Marcus into a big hug. "Congratulations, my friend."

Mary Catherine led the applause on the beach, and the others quickly joined in. The moment was perfect. Flawless. Only as the two men headed back to the shore did Mary Catherine realize she was crying. She wiped the tears from her cheeks. Marcus Dillinger was exactly the sort of guy she had always dreamed about.

But she could never let him know, never give him any sign that she was interested. In fact, she would be better off leaving Los Angeles altogether. Depending on what the doctor said, she might take a year and go to Africa. The way she'd always dreamed.

Anything would be better than feeling this way about a guy she could never have. The Wayne family rushed up to Marcus, congratulating him and hugging him. Mary Catherine and Sami and Tyler waited until he made his

way to them.

“Man, that was beautiful.” Tyler gave him a hearty hug. “I remember when I was baptized. Had a lot of years without God, but now look at us! Ready to change the world!”

“You got it!” Marcus looked exhilarated. The water beaded on his light chocolate skin and his green eyes flashed with joy. He hugged Sami next and then stepped up to Mary Catherine.

Every other time they’d been together, she had avoided hugging him, avoided being in his arms. Especially when it would only make it that much harder to admit the truth. That they could never be more than friends.

But this was not a moment to resist.

She put her arms around his cold, wet, bare waist and he pulled her into a gentle embrace that took her breath. Once, Mary Catherine had read about feeling born for a certain moment. If that was true, then this was that moment. Not jumping from a plane or swimming with the dolphins. But this.

The way she felt in Marcus Dillinger’s arms.

He held on to her longer than the others and when he drew back he put his hand alongside her face. “Thank you. For being here.”

There seemed to be so much more going on between them than their words could begin to acknowledge. Mary Catherine couldn’t look away from him, couldn’t remember that there was anyone else on the beach. She hesitated long enough to hold on to the feeling. “Congratulations. I’m so happy for you.”

Marcus released her and turned to the others. The group talked for a few minutes, relishing the happy occasion. Sami shared about the dolphins, though now there wasn’t one in sight.

“You girls and your imaginations.” Tyler pulled Sami close, grinning at her. “What’s next? You climbed on the back of a dolphin and took a ride up the shore?”

“Hey!” Sami gave him a playful shove. “It’s true.” She looked to Mary Catherine. “Right? Tell him!”

“I believe you.” Marcus was toweling off, shivering from the cold water. He winked at Mary Catherine. “I’ll bet it was amazing.”

“It really was.” She laughed in Marcus’s direction and then looked at the others. “There had to be a dozen of them. For like twenty minutes.”

The conversation turned to the volunteer program and their training that night. “Let us know how it goes.” Ollie Wayne looked at his daughter. “One of Sierra’s friends is going through the program.”

Coach Wayne didn’t elaborate, but clearly the matter made Sierra uncomfortable. Mary Catherine remembered that Rhonda Wayne had said the

family was struggling with their only daughter. She would have to ask Rhonda about it later.

After the Wayne family headed back to the parking lot, Tyler pulled a wetsuit out of his bag. "I promised my girl I'd ride boogie boards with her."

"Finally." Sami laughed and pulled hers back over her shoulders.

"You can use my board." Mary Catherine was still warming up from her time in the water earlier. Besides, she would rather stay on the beach with Marcus than get back in the ocean. She peeled off her sweatshirt and stretched out her legs. "I'll get some sun."

"Is that possible?" Marcus grinned at her. "You don't look much like the tanning type."

"I know." She rolled her eyes. "I have British skin. I can actually spend an hour on the beach and look more pale."

Marcus laughed. "I'll stay here with you. The water's freezing."

He sat next to her. Again their arms touched and Marcus smiled at her. "You're warm."

"The sun feels great." She lifted her face to the sky and closed her eyes. Could he tell how hard her heart was beating? Mary Catherine tried to still her nerves. What was she doing? And what was the point? This—whatever this was—couldn't go anywhere. Sitting this close to Marcus was like a form of torture.

But it felt too wonderful to even think about stopping.

For a while they sat that way, their arms touching, watching Tyler and Sami riding the waves. Tyler wasn't very good on the boogie board. No matter how hard he tried he kept falling off. The scene made for great entertainment, and after a few minutes Mary Catherine and Marcus were both laughing.

"That's my buddy! Mr. Surfer." Marcus laughed again. Then he leaned his head close to hers. "Good thing I don't have a wetsuit. Honestly, I'd be worse than him."

"I'd like to see you try. Someday."

"We'll see." Marcus sighed. "I should probably stick to pitching."

"Yeah, maybe." She shot him a teasing look. "If Tyler's any indication, pitchers might not be that great at riding waves."

Marcus drew one knee up to his chest and chuckled. He turned so he could see her better, but the move broke the physical connection between them. "So . . . what do you know about pitchers?"

"Hmm." She laughed. "Well, for starters they might be better on dry land." Her smile came easily. "Oh . . . and the fact that you're the best."

He tilted his head, searching her face, clearly trying to read her. "Have you

ever seen me pitch?"

"Yes." Mary Catherine remembered it well. She had watched on TV as Marcus pitched the winning game of the last World Series. "You're very good." She felt the teasing in her eyes. "I'm actually a baseball fan."

"You are?"

"Yeah. But . . . not really the Dodgers. I grew up loving the Braves."

"The Braves?" He stood and walked a few steps toward the water before returning. "Are you serious? That lousy team?"

"Yes!" She laughed out loud. "Definitely the Braves. We used to drive down to Atlanta for a couple of games each year." She loved this, the easy way they had together. It was more fun every time they talked. "Nashville has the minor league Sounds. But if you wanted the real thing, Atlanta was the place to be."

"Okay, then." He grinned. "I guess I can sit by you. Since you grew up not knowing better." He settled back on the towel and this time they sat closer than before.

"Very kind of you." The feel of his arm against hers was intoxicating. Mary Catherine had to work to feel the sand beneath her. Otherwise she would've thought she was floating.

"You know. Southern gentleman and all."

"Yes, sir." She milked her accent for all it was worth. "Kind gentleman like you doesn't come around every day."

He tipped his head back and laughed. "I love that! I should've been born in the South." He gave her a mock stern look. "That part about not coming around every day, don't forget it, young lady."

"Deal." She thought about finding her sunglasses in her bag, but the sun was still at their backs. Their faces still had enough shade to talk without the glare of the sun being a problem.

He stretched out his legs again. They were several inches from hers, but with every movement, his arm brushed against hers again. They fell quiet, watching Tyler and Sami. Finally she felt Marcus inhale. He looked at her. "I keep thinking about the other day, you at Elysian Park with Lexy." He shook his head and stared at the ocean for a beat before looking back at her. "I don't know what I would've done if . . . if something had happened to you."

"I'm glad the police were there." She was touched by his concern.

"The world can never lose a girl like you, Mary Catherine. You're the rarest kind of real."

Her head was spinning again, her heart leaping like the dolphins in the waves earlier. "Thank you." She had the strongest desire to rest her head on his shoulder. But she couldn't. This was all pretend. She wasn't being fair to

him or to herself. If they were going to get close like this, she would need to tell him the truth about her heart.

Truth she was going to learn more about any minute, when her phone rang.

“Tell me . . .” His voice was softer now. He looked at her eyes, straight to her aching heart. “Why do you run? When I’m around?”

“I don’t run.” She broke eye contact and turned to look at Tyler and Sami again. “I’m busy, that’s all.”

“No.” His fingertips touched the side of her face. He waited until she looked at him. “You’re not that busy. Only around me.”

She wanted to beg him to stop this part of the conversation, stop it before she had no choice but to be honest. She shrugged and smiled. “Of course, you had Shelly, remember?”

“She wasn’t the problem. You know that.” He wasn’t giving up. “I just want to know. Like . . . is there someone else? I know you said you hadn’t found *that* guy, but maybe there’s someone. Someone you didn’t tell me about?”

A single sad laugh came from her. “No. That’s not it.” She wasn’t sure how much longer she could look at him without giving in to her feelings, without forgetting every true thing about her health and her future and letting her heart win.

Just this once.

“So what is it?” He lowered his hand and allowed the slightest space between them. “You don’t like ballplayers?”

“You’re the first one I’ve been friends with.” She let her smile ease up some, enough that she hoped he could see she was being honest. “Relationships . . . they just aren’t for me. It’s complicated.” She didn’t wait for him to protest. “Maybe I’ll explain it someday.” She stood and stretched out her hand to him. “For now let’s not think about it. Life’s too short to worry.”

He reached out his arm and their fingers touched and held. The feeling was as familiar as it was consuming. Like they’d held hands a thousand times before. He hesitated and then stood, still holding her hand. He looked down into her eyes and she could only allow the feeling between them. A heady wonderful feeling she was sure they were both experiencing.

When he spoke, his words were barely louder than the sound of the surf. “It feels right . . . being with you.”

His words hit their mark. She hesitated and then grinned. “Come on!” She gently pulled him toward the shore.

“Don’t tell me you’re taking me back out into that water.” His easy expression said he wasn’t going to push the issue, wasn’t going to insist on

understanding everything about her right now.

But he also wasn't going to give up.

"Yes!" She led the way to the surf. "It'll be warmer now." They ran to the water. If she had wondered how he felt about her, now she knew. The pull she felt toward him, the way he could look straight through her, Mary Catherine could feel it long after they were waist deep in the water. She knew it because of one thing.

Marcus still had hold of her hand.

Hoofstuk 21

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D

ie water voel wonderlik, vars en koel, teen Mary Catherine se vel – altans, die deel wat nie toe onder die duikpak is nie. En dan die branderryery saam met die dolfyne. Mary Catherine kan nie ophou om God daarvoor te dank nie.

Sy verwag twee oproepe, een oor haar pa se gesondheid en een oor haar eie. Maar al ontvang sy later vanoggend slegte nuus, het sy ten minste die wonderlike uur in die see gehad. Tot dusver was dit 'n volmaakte oggend.

En nou gaan dit nog beter word.

Sy en Sami het gisteraand laat uitvind dat die twee mans en die Wayne-gesin vir 'n baie spesiale okkasie by hulle gaan aansluit. Marcus Dillinger se doop. Dit is moeilik om te glo dat sy 'n paar kort weke gelede nog gedink het hy is vlak en voorspelbaar.

Niks kan verder van die waarheid af wees nie.

Marcus gee opreg om vir mense, en sy nuwe geloof is eg en 'n wesenlike deel van sy lewe.

Hulle ry nog 'n brander, en toe sien hulle die ander in die parkeerarea. 'Hulle het gekom!' sê sy vir Sami.

'Dit gaan wonderlik wees.' Sami vee die water van haar gesig af. 'Ek is so trots op Marcus. Omdat hy dit wil doen.'

'Ek ook.' Met hul borde onder die arm begin hulle terugdraf na die handdoeke toe. Hulle haal ekstra handdoeke uit die sakke en begin afdroog. Omdat hulle later weer wil water toe gaan, trek hulle net die boonste dele van hul duikpake uit.

Mary Catherine het haar blou top met 'Leef die lewe' daarop saamgebring. Wanneer 'n mens gedoopt word, is dit 'n goeie ding om na te dink oor hoe jy

jou lewe leef. Sy trek dit aan en trek haar vingers deur haar hare. Sy hoop die oproepe kom nie tydens die doopgeleentheid nie.

As dit wel gebeur, sal sy moet antwoord. As haar pa se toestand vererger het, moet sy binne 'n paar uur op 'n vliegtuig Nashville toe wees. Selfs al beteken dit dat sy nie die tronktoer kan meemaak nie. Marcus sal dit op sy eie kan doen as hy moet.

Die ander kom nader en Tyler sit sy arm om Marcus se skouers. 'n Mens kan nie 'n beter dag vra vir 'n doop op die strand nie.'

Sami loop hulle tegemoet. Sy gee vir Marcus 'n drukkies en toe vir Tyler. Sy bly langs Tyler, haar arm om sy middel. 'Ons is so bly vir jou onthalwe, Marcus.'

'Ek weet nie hoekom ek so lank gewag het nie.' Hy glimlag en draai na Mary Catherine. 'Die Here praat al 'n ruk lank met my oor 'n klomp dinge.'

Die Wayne-gesin kom nader. Die twee seuns, Shane en Sam, het swemklere en sweetpaktops aan. Sierra lyk geslote in haar jeans en liggewigbaadjie.

Ollie Wayne praat eerste. 'Dankie dat jy ons genooi het. Ons sou dit vir niks op aarde wou misloop nie.' Hy en Rhonda gee almal drukkies. Ollie klop Marcus op die rug. 'Ek onthou nog die dag toe ons kinders gedoop is. Dit is 'n belangrike oomblik.'

Rhonda, Sami en Tyler is aan die gesels toe Ollie terugtree om iets vir sy kinders te sê. In die oomblik toe niemand met Mary Catherine praat nie, gaan staan Marcus langs haar. Hy dra 'n swembroek en T-hemp, en hy staan so naby dat hul arms aan mekaar raak.

Die sweetpaktop wat sy dra, help niks. Mary Catherine voel elke sentimeter waar hy aan haar raak.

'Haai.' Hy glimlag vir haar. 'Dankie dat jy hier is.' Sy oë terg, soos gewoonlik. 'Ek kom pla jou eintlik op jou strandoggend.'

'Nee, jy pla glad nie.' Sy voel hoe haar skanse verbroekel. Elke keer as sy naby Marcus Dillinger is, voel sy net meer aangetrokke tot hom. 'Ek is bly jy is hier. Regtig.'

Almal is besig; niemand kyk na hulle nie. Marcus kyk na Mary Catherine. 'Ek het gisteraand my verhouding met Shelly beëindig.'

Mary Catherine voel skielik lighoofdig. Marcus het dit uitgemaak met Shelly? Is dit wat hy gesê het? Sy hou haar hand voor haar oë. 'Julle is nie meer saam nie?'

'Wel, tegnies was ons nooit saam nie.' Sy stem is skaars harder as 'n fluistering. Hy lag 'n bietjie hartseer. 'Maar sy het so gedink.'

Hy maak sy hart vir haar oop. En Mary Catherine hou van die gevoel wat dit haar gee. Sy hou haar stem ook sag. 'Hoe het sy dit hanteer?'

'Aanvanklik nie goed nie.' Die seebries vou hulle en hul gesprek toe. 'Maar

op die ou end het sy verstaan. Ek het gesê sy is te jonk en ... wel, dat ek nie oor haar voel soos sy oor my nie.'

Mary Catherine ril. 'Dit kon nie maklik gewees het nie.'

'Wel, sy is gou daar weg. Haar vriende het vir haar gewag.' Sy glimlag laat haar smelt. 'Ek dink sy sal gou regkom.'

Die seelug, die son op haar skouers, en Marcus wat so naby aan haar staan dat sy woorde soos fluweel teen haar vel voel, maak Mary Catherine 'n bietjie duiselig. Sy is nie seker wat om te sê nie.

'In elk geval, ek wou jou net sê. Die hele ding by die hospitaal. En toe ons ete saam met Tyler-hulle. Ek wil nie so 'n verhouding hê nie. Ek moes iets doen daaraan.'

Mary Catherine herinner haarself om asem te haal. 'Jy lyk gelukkiger.'

'Ek is.' Hy wys met sy ken na die water. 'En nou gaan ek nog 'n belangrike besluit neem.'

'Ja, beslis.' Mary Catherine wil hê die oomblik moet vir altyd aanhou. Selfs al kan dit nêrens heen lei nie. Hierdie goeie gevoel sal nie vir haar 'n lang lewe kan besorg nie. 'Dankie dat jy my vertel het.'

'Ek moes dit eintlik al vroeër gedoen het.' Die sonlig skyn in sy oë. 'Shelly is nie regtig eg nie.' Hy knip nie sy oë nie, kyk nie weg nie. 'Volgende keer gaan ek nie tevrede wees met iets minder nie.'

Eg. Dit is haar woord. Mary Catherine wil nie hê die oomblik moet ophou nie, maar die ander wag al vir hulle. Hulle kom staan om hulle en kyk na Marcus. Ollie het ook 'n swembroek en T-hemp aan. 'Kom ons begin!'

'Ek is reg!' Marcus trek sy hemp uit en gooi dit op Mary Catherine se handdoek. Die groep loop na die water, Mary Catherine heel agter.

Haar kop draai. Voordat sy die nuus oor haar hart gekry het, dat sy nie lank gaan lewe nie, het sy dit seker honderde kere vir Sami gesê. Al wat sy in 'n man soek, is egtheid. Destyds toe sy gedink het sy het 'n leeftyd voor haar.

Hy moet eg in sy geloof en in sy karakter wees. Eg in die manier hoe hy haar en ander mense behandel.

En nou wil Marcus dit in 'n meisie hê. Sy wil Sami eenkant toe neem en haar vra of sy vir Marcus vertel het. Hoe anders kon hy weet dat dit die een woord is wat reguit met haar siel sal kommunikeer? Maar dit is tog onmoontlik. Sami het nie diep persoonlike gesprekke met Marcus nie.

Sy voel hoe haar voete in die sand wegsink, maar sy gee nie om nie. Dit herinner haar daaraan dat sy regtig hier is, dat hierdie oggend regtig gebeur. Dat Marcus nou net langs haar gestaan het en gesê het hy het sy verhouding met Shelly verbreek omdat hy iemand wil hê wat eg is.

Die wind gaan lê – asof die hemel duidelik wil hoor wat nou gaan gebeur. Mary Catherine staan by Sami en Tyler. Rhonda en die kinders staan naby

hulle, en almal se aandag is op Ollie en Marcus gevestig. Die twee mans loop in tot die water tot by hul middels kom.

Mary Catherine kyk rond. Die strand is stil en leeg. Hierdie hemelse oomblik is vir hulle alleen. Sy kyk terug na Marcus.

Ollie sit sy hand op Marcus se skouer. 'Ek praat al vir 'n lang tyd met Marcus oor die Here Jesus.' Hy bly stil, en na 'n paar oomblikke sien almal dat die trane hom wil oorweldig. Eindelik hoës hy 'n slaggie en gaan dan aan: 'In elk geval. Vandag is die groot dag.'

Marcus knik. Sy glimlag is so breed dat Mary Catherine dit voel daar waar sy staan.

'Julle weet hoe dit werk.' Hy kyk na hulle. 'Marcus het die Here Jesus gevra om sy Verlosser te wees. Nou wil hy sy geloof in die openbaar bevestig. Die doop is 'n simbool van ons sterwe aan onself en opstanding tot 'n nuwe lewe in die Here Jesus.' Ollie kyk weer na Marcus. 'Is jy gereed hiervoor?'

'O ja.'

'Wat hy bedoel, is dat ons besig is om te vries.' Ollie lag. Toe bepaal hy weer sy aandag by die plegtigheid. 'Marcus, jy het besluit om Jesus te volg, en omdat jy jou verbintenis met Hom in die openbaar wil bevestig, doop ek jou in die Naam van die Vader, die Seun en die Heilige Gees.'

Marcus sit sy hand oor sy gesig, druk sy neus toe, en Ollie druk hom onder die water in.

Toe Marcus onder die water verdwyn, sê Ollie: 'Saam met hom begrawe.' Ollie help Marcus om weer regop te staan, en gaan voort: 'En tot 'n nuwe lewe opgewek deur die krag van die Heilige Gees.' Hy gee Marcus 'n drukkie. 'Geluk, my vriend.'

Mary Catherine lei die applous van die strand af, en die ander kom gou by. Dis 'n volmaakte oomblik. Toe die twee mans terugkom strand toe, besef Mary Catherine dat sy huil. Sy vee die trane van haar wange af. Marcus Dillinger is presies die soort man van wie sy altyd gedroom het.

Maar hy mag dit nooit weet nie, en sy mag nooit vir hom wys dat sy geïnteresseerd is nie. Om die waarheid te sê, dit sal beter wees om heeltemal weg te gaan uit Los Angeles. Dit sal afhang van die dokter se verslag, maar sy dink sy sal 'n jaar lank Afrika toe gaan. Soos sy altyd wou.

Enige iets is beter as hierdie gevoelens vir 'n man wat sy nooit kan hê nie. Die Waynes storm nader en wens Marcus geluk, omhels hom. Mary Catherine en Sami en Tyler wag tot hulle klaar is en staan dan nader.

'Dit was baie spesiaal, man.' Tyler sit sy arms om sy vriend se skouers. 'Dit het my aan my eie doop laat dink. Ek het daarna vir baie jare sonder God gelewe, maar kyk nou vir ons: reg om die wêreld beet te pak!'

'Dis soos jy daar sê!' Marcus lyk opgewonde. Die water maak druppels op sy

koffiekleurige vel en sy groen oë blink van vreugde. Hy gee Sami 'n druk en toe is dit Mary Catherine se beurt.

Mary Catherine het nog altyd drukkies met Marcus vermy, het trouens enige kontak vermy. Veral omdat dit dan net nog moeiliker sou wees om die waarheid te erken: dat hulle nooit meer as vriende kan wees nie.

Maar hierdie oomblik is te groot; en sy wil dit ook nie weerstaan nie.

Sy sit haar arms om sy koue, kaal middellyf en hy trek haar nader in 'n sagte omhelsing wat haar asem wegslaan. Mary Catherine het eenkeer gelees dat 'n mens soms voel asof jy vir 'n sekere oomblik gebore is. As dit waar is, dan beleef sy nou haar oomblik. En dit is nie om uit 'n vliegtuig te spring of saam met dolfyne te swem nie. Dit is hierdie oomblik.

Waar Marcus Dillingersy arms om haar sit.

Hy hou haar langer as die ander vas, en toe hy haar los, sit hy sy hand teen haar wang. 'Dankie. Dankie dat jy hier is.'

Daar gebeur baie meer tussen hulle as wat die woorde kan uitdruk. Mary Catherine kan nie wegkyk nie, en vergeet van al die ander mense op die strand. Sy staan stil om die gevoel te koester. 'Geluk. Ek is bly vir jou.'

Marcus los haar en draai na die ander. Hulle gesels 'n rukkie saam, geniet die gelukkige geleentheid. Sami vertel van die dolfyne, alhoewel hulle nou almal weg is.

'Julle en jul ryke verbeeldingsvlugte.' Tyler trek Sami nader en lag vir haar. 'Wat is volgende? Julle het op hul rûe gery tot op die strand?'

'Hei!' Sami gee hom 'n stamp. 'Dis waar.' Sy kyk na Mary Catherine. 'Dit was mos, of hoe? Sê vir hulle!'

'Ek glo julle.' Marcus is besig om hom droog te vryf. Hy bewe van die koue water, en knipoog vir Mary Catherine. 'Ek wed dit was fantasies.'

'Dit was, hoor.' Sy lag in Marcus se rigting, en kyk dan na die ander. 'Daar was ten minste tien van hulle. Vir omtrent twintig minute.'

Die gesprek draai na die vrywilligerprogram en hul opleiding van die aand. 'Vertel vir ons hoe dit gaan.' Ollie Wayne kyk na sy dogter. 'Een van Sierra se vriendinne is ook in die program.'

Hy brei nie uit nie, maar hulle kan sien dat Sierra ongemaklik voel. Mary Catherine onthou dat Rhonda gesê het Sierra gee op die oomblik vir hulle probleme, en sy besluit om haar daarna uit te vra.

Toe die Waynes huis toe vertrek het, gaan haal Tyler 'n duikpak uit sy motor. 'Ek het Sami belowe ek sal die branders saam met haar ry.'

'Uiteindelik!' Sami lag en trek weer haar duikpak se boonste deel aan.

'Jy kan my plank gebruik.' Mary Catherine is nog besig om warm te word in die son. En sy wil buitendien liever saam met Marcus op die strand sit as om weer in die water te gaan. Sy trek haar top uit en strek haar bene. 'Ek wil

bietjie in die son sit.’

‘Is dit moontlik?’ Marcus lag vir haar. ‘Jy lyk nie soos die lêen-bak-in-die-son-tipe nie.’

‘Ek weet.’ Sy slaan haar oë op. ‘Ek het ’n opregte Britse vel. Ek sit ’n uur lank in die son en op die ou end is ek bleker as ooit.’

Marcus lag. ‘Ek sal hier by jou sit. Die water is vriesend koud.’

Hy gaan sit langs haar. Hul arms raak aan mekaar en Marcus glimlag vir haar. ‘Jy voel warm.’

‘Die son bak lekker.’ Sy lig haar gesig na die son en maak haar oë toe. Kan hy sien hoe onstuimig haar hart klop? Mary Catherine probeer haarself kalmeer. Wat vang sy aan? En wat is die punt? Dit – wat dit ook al is – kan tog nêrens heen gaan nie. Om so naby aan Marcus te sit, is ’n vorm van marteling.

En te wonderlik om eers aan ophou te dink.

Hulle sit ’n rukkie so, met hul arms teen mekaar. Hulle kyk hoe Tyler en Sami branders ry. Tyler het nog nie die slag nie, en hy val aanhoudend af. Dis alles groot pret om dop te hou, en na ’n paar minute lag Marcus Dillinger en Mary Catherine al twee.

‘Dis my vriend daai. Meneer branderplank.’ Marcus lag weer. Toe leun hy oor met sy kop naby aan hare. ‘Ook maar goed ek het nie ’n duikpak nie. Ek sal nog slegter as hy vaar.’

‘Ek sal nogal graag wil sien hoe jy probeer. Eendag.’

‘Ons sal sien.’ Marcus sug. ‘Ek behoort dalk liever te hou by gooi.’

‘Ja, dalk.’ Sy kyk teregend na hom. ‘As Tyler ’n aanduiding is, is bofbalspelers nie goed in die branders nie.’

Marcus trek een knie op tot teen sy bors en lag. Hy draai sodat hy haar beter kan sien, en daarmee verbreek hy die fisieke kontak tussen hulle. ‘So ... wat weet jy alles van bofbalspelers?’

‘Hmm.’ Sy lag. ‘Wel, hulle behoort liever op droë grond te bly.’ Sy glimlag gemaklik. ‘O ... en ek weet jy is die beste.’

Hy hou sy kop skeef, soek in haar oë, asof hy probeer om haar gedagtes te lees. ‘Het jy my al sien gooi?’

‘Ja.’ Mary Catherine onthou dit goed. Sy het op televisie gekyk hoe Marcus die wenbal van die vorige wêreldreeks gooi. ‘Jy is baie goed.’ Haar oë is vol terg. ‘Ek is ’n bofbal-aanhanger, ingeval jy gewonder het.’

‘Ja?’

‘Ja. Maar ... nie van die Dodgers nie. Die Braves is my span, van ek ’n kind was.’

‘Wat? Die Braves?’ Marcus staan op loop na die see en terug. ‘Is jy ernstig? Daardie hopelose span?’

‘Ja!’ sy lag hardop. ‘Beslis die Braves. Ons het altyd Atlanta toe gegaan vir ’n

paar van hul wedstryde.’ Sy hou van die gemaklike manier waarop hulle saam is. Elke keer as hulle sit en gesels, is dit lekkerder. ‘Nashville het sy Sounds, maar hulle is nie in die eerste liga nie. As jy die ware Jakob wou sien, moes jy Atlanta toe gaan.’

‘Nou goed dan.’ Marcus glimlag. ‘Ek kan seker nog langs jou sit. Aangesien jy grootgeword het sonder om van beter te weet.’ Hy gaan sit weer op die handdoek, nader as voorheen.

‘Dis baie gaaf van jou.’ Die gevoel van sy arm teen hare is bedwelmend. Mary Catherine moet hard werk om die sand onder haar te voel, anders sal sy begin dink sy sweef.

‘Jy weet. Aangesien ek nou ’n ware heer is en als.’

‘Ja, Meneer.’ Sy haal haar beste suidelike aksent uit. ‘Ware here soos jy krap mens nie agter elke bos uit nie.’

Hy gooi sy kop agteroor en lag. ‘Ek hou daarvan as jy so praat! Ek dink ek moes eintlik in die suide gebore gewees het.’ Hy kyk gemaak streng na haar. ‘En, jonge dame, moenie die deel vergeet waar jy my nie agter elke bos kan uitkrap nie!’

‘Reg!’ Sy moet seker haar sonbril gaan haal, maar die son kom nog van agter en hul gesigte is in die skadu.

Hy strek weer sy bene voor hom uit. Hulle is ’n ent weg van hare, maar met elke beweging skuur sy arm teen hare. Hulle sit en kyk na Tyler en Sami. Uiteindelik voel sy Marcus diep asemhaal. Hy kyk na haar. ‘Ek dink die hele tyd aan die ander dag, toe jy in die park saam met Lexy was.’ Hy skud sy kop en staar oor die see voordat hy weer na haar kyk. ‘Ek weet nie wat ek sou gedoen het as ... as iets met jou gebeur het nie. Ek is net bly die polisie was daar.’ Sy bekommernis ontroer haar. ‘Die wêreld kan nie iemand soos jy verloor nie, Mary Catherine. Jy is enig in jou soort.’

Haar kop draai al weer, en haar hart bokspring soos die dolfyne in die branders. ‘Dankie.’ Sy wil so graag haar kop op sy skouer laat rus. Maar sy moenie. Dit sal nie werk nie. Dit is nie regverdig teenoor hom of haarself nie. As hulle so na aan mekaar gaan raak, sal sy hom die waarheid oor haar hart moet vertel.

Die waarheid wat sy enige oomblik gaan hoor, wanneer haar telefoon lui.

‘Sê vir my ...’ Sy stem is nou sagter. Hy kyk in haar oë, tot reg in haar seer hart in. ‘Waarom hardloop jy weg? As ek naby is?’

‘Ek hardloop nie.’ Sy kyk weg, en kyk weer na Tyler en Sami. ‘Ek is net besig, dis al.’

‘Nee.’ Sy vingerpunte raak weer aan haar wang. Hy wag tot sy na hom kyk.

‘Jy is nie so besig nie. Net as ek naby is.’

Sy wil hom soebat om nie daaroor te praat nie, om op te hou voordat sy

gedwing word om eerlik te wees. Sy haal haar skouers op en glimlag. ‘Wel, daar was Shelly, nie waar nie?’

‘Sy was nie die probleem nie. Jy weet dit.’ Hy gaan nie tou opgooi nie. ‘Ek wil net weet. Byvoorbeeld ... is daar iemand anders? Ek weet jy het gesê jy het nog nie daardie spesiale ou ontmoet nie, maar miskien is daar iemand. Iemand van wie jy my nie vertel het nie?’

Sy lag, maar dit klink hartseer. ‘Nee. Dis nie wat dit is nie.’ Sy is nie seker hoe lank sy na hom sal kan kyk sonder om haar hart te volg en alles oor haar gesondheid en toekoms te vergeet nie.

Net hierdie een keer.

‘Wat is dit dan?’ Hy neem sy hand effens weg. ‘Hou jy nie van bofbalspelers nie?’

‘Jy is die eerste een met wie ek vriende is.’ Sy hoop hy kan sien sy is eerlik. ‘Verhoudings ... is nie vir my nie. Dis ingewikkeld.’ Sy wag nie vir ’n antwoord nie. ‘Miskien sal ek eendag verduidelik.’ Sy staan op en hou haar hand uit. ‘Kom ons dink aan iets anders. Die lewe is te kort vir bekommernisse.’

Hy steek sy arm uit en hul vingers raak aan mekaar en bly ineengestrengel. Die gevoel is bekend en oorweldigend. Asof hulle al ’n duisend keer vantevore hande vasgehou het. Hy huiwer en staan dan op, steeds met haar hand in syne. Hy kyk af in haar oë en sy kan nie die gevoel tussen hulle ontken nie. ’n Tintelende, wonderlike gevoel – en sy is seker hulle voel dit al twee.

Toe hy weer praat, is sy woorde skaars hoorbaar bokant die geluid van die branders. ‘Dit voel so reg ... om by jou te wees.’

Sy woorde tref haar. Sy huiwer en glimlag dan. ‘Kom!’ Sy trek hom na die water toe.

‘Moenie sê jy gaan my weer in daardie water invat nie.’ Sy gemaklike houding sê vir haar dat hy nie die saak gaan druk nie, dat hy nie daarop gaan aandring om nou dadelik alles omtrent haar uit te vind nie.

Maar dat hy ook nie gaan tou opgooi nie.

‘Ja! Dit sal nou warmer wees.’ Hulle hardloop na die water. En sy hoef nie meer te wonder hoe hy oor haar voel nie. Sy weet. Die aangetrokkenheid tussen hulle, die gevoel dat hy tot in haar siel kan sien – toe hulle al tot by hul middels in die water is, voel Mary Catherine dit nog. Om ’n goeie rede.

Marcus hou nog steeds haar hand vas.



MARCUS WAITED UNTIL HE and Tyler were halfway home before he laughed out loud. “Okay, so what’s with that girl? Just when I think I have her figured out, she throws me off again.”

“I thought you might be thinking about her.” Tyler laughed, too. He leaned against the passenger door and looked at Marcus. “Man, you got it bad for her. The whole beach could see.”

“Just a couple of friends celebrating a great day at Zuma.” He shook his head and kept his eyes on the road. “That’s how she sees it.”

“What about that holding hands thing?” Tyler was definitely enjoying the banter. “She didn’t seem to fight that very much.”

“True.” He felt baffled. “She said she’s not into relationships. Something like that.”

“Well . . . maybe you’ll actually have to chase her.” Tyler grinned. “She might be the only single girl in the world who wouldn’t jump at the chance to date you.”

“She’s definitely on the list.” He replayed the moments with her again in his mind. “I know this. There’s no other girl like her. It’s like nothing could take her down. Like she’ll be celebrating life until she’s a hundred years old.”

Tyler laughed again. “I just hope it doesn’t take you that long to get her to change her mind.”

Marcus rolled down the window and let the warm January air drift through his SUV. “I might just wait that long.” He leaned back and smiled. “If she doesn’t drive me crazy first.”



NOT UNTIL AFTER Marcus and Tyler left did Mary Catherine realize she hadn’t heard from either her mom or the doctor. *Strange*, she thought. She dug around on her towel and found her phone.

It was turned off.

That’s weird, she thought. *Maybe the battery died*. She held the button at the top of the phone and the screen came to life. After a few seconds she

could see for herself. The battery was still full.

So when had she turned it off?

Before she could figure out an answer she watched several messages come through. Two of them were voice mails, one from her mother, one from her cardiologist. Sami was gathering her things, but Mary Catherine needed to check the messages first.

She noted the time of the calls. Her mother's came in right as Marcus was being baptized. The doctor's happened fifteen minutes later, when Marcus had just taken the spot beside her on the towel. She would've missed all of that if her phone had been on.

She had no time to worry about it. She played the message from her mom first. Her mother's voice came on the line and Mary Catherine put her hand over her other ear. She needed to focus, needed to hear every word.

"Honey, call me. Good news." That was it. All her mother said. The message was the last thing Mary Catherine had expected. She dialed her mother's number and waited.

"Hello, honey!" Her mom sounded happier than she had in months. "Your father's doing so much better!"

"What happened?" Mary Catherine felt the sting of tears. Her father wasn't healthy. She would need to get out to Nashville again soon. Before she could think about a trip to Africa. But for now he was at least out of danger. *Thank You, God . . . thank You.*

Her mom was explaining what had happened, how they'd gotten much closer since his illness. And how she'd been spending more time at the hospital with him. "He looked like he'd need heart surgery, and you know your father. With his weight . . . he's just not a candidate right now."

"I know." Mary Catherine felt the burden of her father's health again. "One day, maybe."

"Anyway." Her mother paused only long enough to catch a quick breath. "This new doctor visited us today. A pretty woman. She found a better medication for the IV. It only took an hour and his numbers were so much better." She sounded deeply relieved. "Makes me wonder if the woman was an angel. Anyway, just wanted you to know he's good for now. Your dad asked me to tell you that he misses you. We both do."

"Miss you, too. Tell Daddy I love him."

"I will. Love you, too."

The conversation ended and Mary Catherine stared out at the water, to the place where Marcus had been baptized little more than an hour ago. God was with them. No matter how terribly the week had gone or what evil existed in the world, the Lord was still at work.

He had allowed her divorced parents to find friendship again. And He had sent a doctor to heal her father.

Which meant now she could still do the Last Time In program with Marcus. Mary Catherine stared at her phone. The other message was from her cardiologist. But suddenly she didn't want to hear it. The news could wait. She only wanted to live in the moment and remember every amazing thing about the morning and her time with Marcus.

She stood and walked to the edge of the water, her eyes trained on the horizon. The time with Marcus today had been a dream. Better than a dream. He was funny and sensitive and he wanted to take their friendship deeper. To a place where there were no secrets.

Mary Catherine thought about the message waiting for her, the one from the doctor. Her failing health was her greatest secret, the one thing she never wanted to share with Marcus. She didn't want him feeling sorry for her or trying to convince her she was wrong about her decision to stay single.

Sami came up alongside her. "How's your dad?"

"He's great." She turned and smiled. "Some new doctor came on the scene today and gave him a different medicine." She still couldn't believe the news. "He won't need surgery after all."

"So you can stay with the prison program."

"Yes." She grew quiet, looking back at the ocean again. "Was it obvious?"

"You and Marcus?" Sami laughed quietly. "Very." She faced Mary Catherine. "Did you tell him? About your heart?"

"No." Mary Catherine wanted to run down the beach, far from the reality of her health. "I can't tell him. I shouldn't have told you."

"Why?" Sami sounded hurt. "Don't say that. I won't tell anyone. Not even Tyler." She didn't say anything for a few seconds. "It's just . . . with Marcus . . . you told me you didn't want to date. You might only have ten years. Remember?"

"I still feel that way." She exhaled and felt the weight of the entire beach on her shoulders. "I tried to tell him."

"What'd you say?" Sami wasn't pushing. She was only being a friend.

"I told him relationships weren't for me. I said it was complicated."

Sami looked surprised. "He didn't ask for more of an explanation?"

"He would've." She ignored the hurt inside. "I made him go to the water with me instead."

"The hand-holding?" A sparkle started in Sami's eyes and turned into a smile. "It's okay, Mary Catherine. Why do you have to be so hard on yourself? You don't know what's going to happen. You might end up in a rocking chair next to me when you're eighty." She hesitated. "Only God

knows the number of your days.”

“True.” She longed for the scenario Sami described, longed for a reason to believe it was possible. “But my heart condition . . . it’s a real thing, Sami. I can’t put that on someone else.”

“Maybe you don’t have to. Just wait it out. Have fun.” She breathed in deep and did a little spin on the sand. Then she angled her face, empathy marking her expression. “Isn’t that what you taught me?”

“Yes.” Mary Catherine smiled. If only it were that easy. “In everything but love.”

“Maybe especially in love.” Sami wasn’t giving up. There was a pleading in her voice. Like she was desperate for Mary Catherine to relax her way of thinking. “You told me to visit my old boyfriend when I was in Florida. And look at Tyler and me now.”

“Sami.” Mary Catherine needed her friend to understand. “I can’t do that to Marcus. Don’t you see? He deserves the sort of love that can live on and on.” She felt tears choking her, making it impossible to speak. She turned to the ocean again and waited.

Sami came up beside her again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you sad. But you’re just friends. You can at least give that much a chance.”

“It’s just . . .” She sniffed, still struggling. “I feel more. And I can’t.”

“Maybe you can.” Sami hesitated. “No one knows the number of their days. I could fall over right here on the sand.” Her words were gentle this time. “I would never regret loving Tyler. Even if we only had today.”

Mary Catherine nodded. She understood what Sami meant. She really did. It just wasn’t fair to either of them—her or Marcus—to let him think there was a chance. A chance at love and a normal life together. Why let something begin when the ending was already written?

They’d spent enough time talking about it. Mary Catherine smiled at her friend. “Come on. Let’s get back.” She walked slowly to her things and packed them into her bag. “Besides, I’m not sure he even likes me.”

“MC, that’s the most ridiculous thing I ever—”

“Okay, okay.” Mary Catherine laughed and it felt wonderful for the moment to be light again. “Maybe he likes me just a little.”

Sami made an exasperated sound. “You’ll make plans to get your pilot’s license, but you won’t let yourself fall in love.” Sami gathered her board and her bags. “Maybe just think awhile on your priorities. Okay?”

“I have.” She grinned. “Conversation closed. But speaking of priorities, is it your turn to vacuum? Because I think it is.”

They both started giggling and then walked in comfortable silence back to the car. Mary Catherine was grateful for Sami, for a friend who cared and

could laugh with her.

The ride home didn't include a single mention of Marcus. Mary Catherine was relieved. There really was nothing to say, nowhere the topic could go.

Not until they were back at the apartment and Mary Catherine was in her room did she close the door and listen to the message from her cardiologist. The man's secretary had simply advised her to return the call. Her test results were in. Mary Catherine waited, her hands trembling. If only she could put off the news, put it aside and forget about it. *Father, I need You . . . I can't do this without You*. She closed her eyes and waited. After a minute or so a feeling of peace came over her. Peace enough to make the call.

She opened her eyes and tapped the call button.

A receptionist answered. "Dr. Cohen's office."

"This is Mary Catherine Clark." She couldn't shake the feeling that the news would be bad. "I missed a call from your office earlier."

"Yes, hold on." The woman sounded efficient. There was no reading her tone. "The doctor would like to speak to you."

"That's fine." Mary Catherine dropped on the edge of her bed and waited. The seconds felt like days.

"Hello? Mary Catherine?" It was Dr. Cohen. He was in his forties. One of the top cardiologists in Los Angeles.

"Hi. I missed your call earlier." She paused. "Is it about my test results?"

"Yes." He sighed. Not a quick sigh. But the kind that doctors tended to do when the information ahead might be difficult.

She closed her eyes again. *Whatever it is, God, You're in charge. You know the number of my days. I believe that.*

"Mary Catherine, I'm afraid the results were worse than we expected. Your valve has deteriorated greatly. But more than that, your heart is further enlarged." He paused. "I shared your results with a few respected cardiologist friends of mine. One in New York. One in Boston."

Mary Catherine slid off the edge of her bed to the floor. She brought her legs to her chest and let her forehead rest on her knees. "Okay. Yes?"

"We all came to the same conclusion. Mary Catherine, I'm afraid we'd like to put you on the heart transplant list. The sooner the better."

A black hole seemed to open up in the spot where she was sitting. Darker and darker, blacker and blacker. She could feel herself falling into it and the whole time she was certain of one awful reality. There was no bottom. She would keep falling for the rest of her days.

Because this was the worst possible news he could've told her.

"Mary Catherine? Do you understand, dear?"

"Yes, sir." Her voice was soft and shaky. "So . . . what's next? What

should I do?"

"We have to have you into the office in the next week or so for a complete checkup. You'll need more tests and blood work. Then there'll be a screening exam and some paperwork. All of that before we can get you on the donor list."

In the black hole where she was falling, Mary Catherine couldn't catch her breath, couldn't exhale fully. Like she was drowning in her own bedroom. "You mean . . . you want the surgery soon?"

"It's never that easy." He sounded discouraged by the fact. "Your heart and valve can go on for probably another nine months or a year. Even after your appointment it could be months before we get you on the transplant list. It's a process. Many people never get a donor, Mary Catherine. I need to be honest."

She still couldn't believe what he was saying. The transplant she'd expected in the years to come was supposed to be a valve replacement. Not a heart transplant. What about Africa? What about helping with the youth center? How was she supposed to get her pilot's license if she was waiting for a heart transplant?

"Did you hear me?" The doctor's words were kind. "I'm so sorry, Mary Catherine. I know this must be a shock to you. Frankly, it was a shock to me. That's why I sought the other opinions." He waited a beat. "I'm very, very sorry."

"It's okay." She was still falling, still trying to get a full breath. What about mornings on the beach and swimming with the dolphins?

"I'll transfer you back to the receptionist. I'd like you to book the appointment as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Mary Catherine couldn't lift her head, couldn't do anything but feel herself falling. What about her brand-new job as a graphic designer at Front Line Studios in Santa Monica? She was supposed to be there next year when their first movie hit theaters.

A heart transplant?

Sometime before the end of the year?

Falling . . . falling. Mary Catherine stood and steadied herself on the edge of her bed. Then with her remaining energy she walked to the window and looked at the blue sky. The beautiful Southern California sky. How could this happen?

She thought about her friends. Now she would have to tell Marcus. Not right away, but sometime soon. She'd have to tell all of them. If only she could stop falling, stop the blackness of the dark hole she'd stepped into. Before the call she'd thought she had till she was thirty. Another seven years

at least.

Suddenly thirty felt like an impossible number. Like a gift.

Maybe there was some mistake. She felt fine, right? She wasn't short of breath or struggling with chest pains. People waiting for a heart transplant were very sick. Too weak to get out of bed. Mary Catherine clung to the window frame and thought about her morning, about the feel of Marcus's arm against hers. *What about moments like that, God?* There would be no time to make a difference, no time for learning the guitar or taking voice lessons.

She wouldn't live long enough for any of it. Mary Catherine closed her eyes, but the tears came anyway. The blackness was swallowing up the moment, and still she was falling. Everything was different now. Everything would change. And of course there was something else she would have to give up. The thing she only joked about every now and then and once in a while prayed about. The thing that would absolutely never be possible now.

Her hundred years.

Hoofstuk 22

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M

arcus wag tot hy en Tyler halfpad huis toe is voordat hy hardop lag. 'Wat is dit met daardie meisiekind? Net wanneer ek dink ek verstaan haar, maak sy my heeltemal deurmekaar.'

'Ek het nogal vermoed jy dink aan haar.' Tyler lag ook. Hy leun teen die passasiersdeur en kyk na Marcus. 'Mensdom, maar jy het die skoot hoog deur. Die hele strand kon dit nie mis nie.'

'Net 'n paar vriende wat 'n wonderlike dag vier.' Hy skud sy kop en hou sy oë op die pad. 'Altans, dis hoe sy dit sien.'

'En wat van die handevashouery?' Tyler geniet dit om sy vriend se siel uit te trek. 'Dit het nie gelyk asof sy ontevrede voel daaroor nie.'

'Dis waar.' Hy voel 'n bietjie dronkgeslaan. 'Sy sê verhoudings is nie vir haar nie. So iets.'

'Wel ... miskien sal jy haar die hof moet maak.' Tyler lag. 'Miskien is sy die enigste meisie in die hele wêreld wat nie spring as sy 'n kans kry om met jou uit te gaan nie.'

'Sy is beslis op daardie lys.' Hy dink weer aan hul tydjie saam. 'Ek weet net een ding. Daar is nie nog 'n meisie soos sy nie. Dis asof niks haar kan

onderkry nie. Asof sy nog die lewe sal vier as sy honderd jaar oud is.’
Tyler lag weer. ‘Wel, ek hoop van harte jy hoef nie so lank te sukkel om haar sover kry om van plan te verander wat jou betref nie.’
Marcus maak die venster oop sodat die warm luggie deur die motor kan stoot. ‘Dalk sal ek nog moet.’ Hy leun terug en glimlag. ‘As sy my nie eers mal maak nie.’

~

Eers toe Marcus en Tyler weg is, besef Mary Catherine dat sy nog nie ’n telefoonoproep gekry het nie. *Dis snaaks*, dink sy. Sy soek rond op die handdoek tot sy die selfoon kry.

Dit is afgeskakel.

Vreemd, dink sy. *Miskien is die battery pap*. Sy hou die knoppie in en die skerm kry lewe. Na ’n paar sekondes kan sy sien dat die foon nog gelaai is.

Wanneer het sy dit dan afgeskakel?

Voordat sy dit kan uitwerk, kom verskeie boodskappe deur. Twee is stemboodskappe, een van haar ma en een van die kardioloog. Sami is besig om haar goed bymekaar te maak, maar Mary Catherine moet dadelik na die boodskappe luister.

Sy sien dat haar ma se oproep ingekom het net mooi toe Marcus gedoop is. Die dokter s’n was ’n kwartier later, net toe Marcus langs haar kom sit het. Sy sou alles misgeloop het as haar telefoon aan was.

Wel, sy kan haar nie nou daaroor bekommer nie. Sy luister eers na haar ma se boodskap. Mary Catherine sit haar ander hand oor haar ander oor. Sy wil nie ’n woord mis nie.

‘Liefie, bel my. Ek het goeie nuus.’ Dis al wat haar ma sê. Die boodskap is heeltemal onverwags. Mary Catherine bel gou haar ma en wag.

‘Hallo, liefie!’ Haar ma klink gelukkiger as die afgelope maande. ‘Dit gaan baie beter met jou pa.’

‘Wat het gebeur?’ Mary Catherine voel trane in haar oë opwel. Haar pa het nie meer lank om te lewe nie. Sy moet gou weer in Nashville kom. Voordat sy eens kan begin dink aan ’n reis na Afrika. Maar vir eers is hy buite gevaar.

Dankie, Here ... dankie.

Haar ma is besig om te vertel dat sy en haar pa nader aan mekaar gekom het vandat hy siek geword het. En dat sy hom dikwels in die hospitaal besoek. ‘Ons het gedink hy sal ’n hartoperasie moet kry, maar jy ken jou pa. Met sy gewig ... hulle het gesê hy sal eers gewig moet verloor.’

‘Ek weet.’ Mary Catherine voel weer die las van haar pa se gesondheid. ‘Miskien eendag.’

‘In elk geval.’ Haar ma bly net lank genoeg stil om asem te skep. ‘Daar was

vandag 'n nuwe dokter. 'n Mooi swart vrou. Sy het nuwe medikasie in die drup gesit. En Pa het skaars 'n uur later klaar beter begin voel.' Sy klink baie verlig. 'Ek het gewonder of die vrou nie dalk 'n engel is nie. In elk geval, ek wou net laat weet het dat alles vir eers goed gaan. Jou pa sê ek moet sê hy mis jou. Ons al twee mis jou.'

'Ek mis julle ook. Sê vir Pappa ek is lief vir hom.'

'Ek sal. Lief vir jou.'

Hulle groet en Mary Catherine staar uit oor die water, na die plek waar Marcus skaars 'n uur gelede gedoop is. God is by hulle. Baie dinge het die afgelope week verkeerd geloop, en daar is baie kwaad in die wêreld, maar tog: Sy kan sien dat die Here aan die werk is.

Hy het haar geskeide ouers weer op 'n manier by mekaar uitgebring. En Hy het 'n dokter gestuur om haar pa beter te maak.

Wat beteken dat sy nog steeds die Laaste Keer In-program saam met Marcus kan doen. Mary Catherine staar na haar selfoon. Die ander boodskap is van die kardioloog. Maar skielik wil sy dit nie hoor nie. Die nuus kan eers wag. Sy wil in hierdie oomblik lewe en elke oomblik van die hele wonderlike oggend en haar tyd saam met Marcus herleef.

Sy staan op en stap na die water, haar oë op die horison. Haar tydjie saam met Marcus was 'n droom. Beter as 'n droom. Hy is snaaks en sensitief en hy wil beslis hul vriendskap verder voer. Na 'n plek waar daar nie geheime is nie.

Mary Catherine dink aan die boodskap van haar dokter. Haar swak gesondheid is haar grootste geheim, die een ding wat sy nie vir Marcus wil vertel nie. Sy wil nie hê hy moet haar jammer kry, of haar probeer oortuig om haar besluit om enkellopend te bly, te verander nie.

Sami kom staan langs haar. 'Hoe gaan dit met jou pa?'

'Beter.' Sy glimlag vir Sami. 'Daar was 'n nuwe dokter wat hom ander medisyne gegee het.' Sy kan die goeie nuus skaars glo. 'Hy gaan op die ou end nie 'n operasie hoef te kry nie.'

'So jy kan by die program bly.'

'Ja.' Sy bly stil en staar weer oor die see. 'Was dit so duidelik?'

'Jy en Marcus?' Sami lag sag. 'O ja.' Sy draai na Mary Catherine. 'Het jy hom vertel? Van jou hart?'

'Nee.' Mary Catherine wil met die strand langs begin hardloop, weg van die werklikheid van haar gesondheid af. 'Ek kan hom nie vertel nie. Ek moes jou eintlik ook nie vertel het nie.'

'Waarom nie?' Sami klink seergemaak. 'Jy moenie so sê nie. Ek sal vir niemand vertel nie. Nie eens vir Tyler nie.' Sy bly 'n paar oomblikke lank stil. 'Dis net ... met Marcus ... jy het gesê jy wil nie uitgaan nie. Dat jy moontlik net dertig jaar op aarde het. Onthou jy?'

‘Ja, en ek voel nog steeds so.’ Sy blaas haar asem uit maar dit voel steeds asof die hele strand op haar skouers rus. ‘Ek het probeer om vir hom te sê.’

‘Wat het jy gesê?’ Sami is nie opdringerig nie. Sy wil net vir Mary Catherine ’n vriendin wees.

‘Ek het gesê verhoudings is nie vir my nie. Ek het gesê dis ingewikkeld.’

Sami lyk verbaas. ‘En hy’t nie ’n beter verduideliking gevra nie?’

‘Hy wou.’ Sy ignoreer die seer in haar. ‘Ek het hom saam met my water toe gesleep.’

‘Die hande-vashou?’ Sami se oë begin blink en sy glimlag. ‘Toemaar, Mary Catherine. Hoekom is jy so hard met jouself? Jy weet mos nie wat gaan gebeur nie. Dalk eindig ons al twee in stoele op die ouetehuis se stoep as ons tagtig is.’ Sy huiwer. ‘Dis net God wat die getal van ons dae ken.’

‘Dis waar.’ Sy verlang so na die lewe wat Sami beskryf, wens daar was ’n rede om te glo dit is moontlik. ‘Maar my hart ... dis die werklikheid, Sami. Ek kan nie so ’n las op iemand anders laai nie.’

‘Miskien hoef jy nie. Wag en kyk wat gebeur. Geniet die lewe.’ Sy haal diep asem en draai in die rondte op die sand. Toe kyk sy met oneindige simpatie na haar vriendin. ‘Is dit nie wat jy my geleer het nie?’

‘Ja.’ Mary Catherine glimlag. As dit maar so maklik was. ‘In alles behalwe ’n verhouding.’

‘Miskien veral in ’n verhouding.’ Sami gaan nie moed verloor nie. Haar stem klink ’n bietjie desperaat. Asof sy meer as enige iets anders wil hê Mary Catherine moet anders dink. ‘Jy het gesê ek moet my gewese kêrel in Florida gaan opsoek. En kyk waar is ek en Tyler nou.’

‘Sami.’ Sy moet haar vriendin laat verstaan. ‘Ek kan dit nie aan Marcus doen nie. Kan jy dit nie insien nie? Hy verdien die soort liefde wat lewenslank hou.’ Sy voel die trane opstoot, en dit maak dit onmoontlik om verder te praat. Sy draai weer na die see en staan stil en wag.

Sami kom staan weer langs haar. ‘Ek is jammer. Ek wou jou nie hartseer maak nie. Maar julle is tog vriende. Miskien kan julle ten minste vriende wees.’

‘Dis net.’ Mary Catherine sukkel om die woorde uit te kry. ‘Ek voel meer as vriendskap. En ek moenie.’

‘Miskien kan jy tog.’ Sami huiwer. ‘Niemand weet hoe lank hulle gaan lewe nie. Ek kan vandag omval en doodgaan.’ Haar woorde is sag. ‘Ek sal nooit spyt wees ek het Tyler liefgehad nie. Selfs al was dit net vir een dag.’

Mary Catherine knik. Sy verstaan wat Sami bedoel. Regtig. Dit sal net nie regverdig wees – teenoor haar of teenoor Marcus – om hom te laat dink daar is ’n kans nie. ’n Kans op liefde en ’n normale lewe saam nie. Waarom begin met iets as die einde reeds in sig is?

Hulle het nou lank genoeg daaroor gepraat. Mary Catherine glimlag. 'Kom. Ons moet teruggaan.' Sy stap stadig tot by haar goed en begin dit in die sak pak. 'Buitendien, ek is nie eens seker hy hou van my nie.'

'MC, dis sowaar die domste ding wat ek al ooit ...'

'Goed, goed.' Mary Catherine lag en dit voel wonderlik om weer lig en vrolik te wees. 'Miskien hou hy 'n bietjie van my.'

Sami snork verontwaardig. 'Jy sal planne maak om 'n vlieënierslisensie te kry, maar jy sal jouself nie toelaat om verlief te raak nie.' Sami tel haar goed op. 'Miskien moet jy 'n slag aan prioriteite begin dink. Of hoe?'

'Ek het.' Mary Catherine glimlag breed. 'Einde van gesprek. Maar van prioriteite gepraat, is dit nie jou beurt om te stofsuiig nie? Want ek dink dit is.'

Hulle begin lag, en loop toe in gemaklike stilte terug na die motor toe. Mary Catherine is dankbaar vir Sami, dat sy 'n vriendin het wat omgee en saam met haar kan lag.

Hulle praat nie weer oor Marcus op pad huis toe nie. Mary Catherine is verlig. Daar is niks meer om te sê nie, nêrens om met die onderwerp heen te gaan nie. Terug in haar kamer in die woonstel maak sy die deur toe en luister na die dokter se boodskap. Die sekretaresse sê sy moet hom terugbel. Die resultate van die toetse het teruggekom. Mary Catherine se hande begin bewe. As sy net die nuus kan uitstel, daarvan kan vergeet. *Vader, ek het U nodig ... ek kan dit nie sonder U doen nie.* Sy maak haar oë toe en wag. Na 'n minuut of wat daal 'n gevoel van vrede oor haar neer. Sodat sy die oproep kan maak.

Sy maak haar oë oop en druk die lui-knoppie.

Die ontvangsdame antwoord. 'Dokter Cohen se spreekkamer.'

'Ek is Mary Catherine Clark.' Sy kan nie ontslae raak van die gevoel dat sy slegte nuus gaan kry nie. 'Julle het vroeër vanoggend gebel.'

'Ja, hou net 'n oomblik aan.' Die vrou klink bekwaam, en 'n mens kan niks uit haar stemtoon wys word nie. 'Dokter wil graag met jou praat.'

'Dankie.' Mary Catherine gaan sit op die rand van haar bed en wag. Die sekondes voel soos dae.

'Hallo? Mary Catherine?' Dokter Cohen is in sy veertigs, en een van die beste kardioloë in Los Angeles.

'Hallo. Ek het u oproep gemis.' Sy bly stil. 'Is dit oor die toetsresultate?'

'Ja.' Hy sug. Nie 'n vinnige sug nie. Dis die soort sug wat dokters gee wanneer hulle moeilike nuus moet oordra.

Sy maak weer haar oë toe. *Wat dit ook al is, Here, U is in beheer. U ken die getal van my dae. Ek glo dit.*

'Mary Catherine, ek is bevrees die uitslae is slegter as wat ons verwag het. Jou hartklep het baie agteruitgegaan. Maar jou hart het ook verder vergroot.' Hy bly stil. 'Ek het jou resultate met 'n paar erkende kardioloë, vriende van my,

bespreek. Die een is in New York, en die ander een in Boston.'

Mary Catherine gly van die bed af tot op die vloer. Sy trek haar knieë teen haar borskas op en laat haar voorkop op haar knieë rus. 'Ja, en?'

'Ons het almal tot dieselfde gevolgtrekking gekom, Mary Catherine. Ek is bevrees ons moet jou op die waglys plaas vir 'n hartoorplanting. Hoe gouer, hoe beter.'

Dis asof 'n groot swart gat onder haar oopgaan. Donkerder en donkerder, swarter en swarter. Sy kan voel hoe sy daarin val en van net een ding seker is: Hierdie gat het nie 'n bodem nie. Sy sal vir die res van haar lewe val, al dieper en dieper.

Want die dokter kon nie vir haar slegter nuus gegee het nie.

'Mary Catherine? Jy verstaan wat ek sê, nê?'

'Ja, Dokter.' Haar stem is sag en bewierig. 'Um ... wat is nou volgende? Wat moet ek doen?'

'Ek wil graag hê jy moet volgende week inkom spreekkamer toe vir 'n volledige ondersoek. Ons sal nog bloed- en ander toetse doen. Dan sal daar 'n tipe van keuringsondersoek wees en vorms om in te vul. Dit is sodat ons jou op die waglys geplaas kan kry.'

In die swart gat waarin sy besig is om te tuimel, is daar ook nie lug nie. Mary Catherine kry nie asem nie, kan ook nie heeltemal uitasem nie, asof sy besig is om in haar eie kamer te verdrink. 'U bedoel ... die operasie is om die draai?'

'Dis nooit so eenvoudig nie.' Hy klink mismoedig. 'Jou hart en klep sal nog vir ongeveer nege maande tot 'n jaar hou. Maar selfs na jou afspraak kan dit maande duur voordat jy op die waglys kom. Dit is 'n proses. Baie mense kry nooit 'n geskikte skenker nie, Mary Catherine. Ek moet eerlik wees daaroor.'

Sy kan nie glo wat hy sê nie. Die operasie wat sy verwag het, was ver in die toekoms, en net 'n klepvervanging. Nie 'n hartoorplanting nie. Wat van Afrika? Wat van haar werk by die jeugsentrum? En hoe gaan sy 'n vlieglicensie kry as sy op 'n hartoorplanting moet wag?

'Het jy gehoor wat ek sê, Mary Catherine?' Die dokter se stem is vriendelik.

'Ek is so jammer. Ek weet dit moet 'n groot skok wees. Om die waarheid te sê, dit is vir my ook 'n skok. Dit is waarom ek ander dokters se opinie gevra het.' Hy bly weer stil. 'Ek is baie, baie jammer.'

'Alles reg.' Sy val nog, sukkel nog om asem te haal. Wat vanoggende op die strand, swem saam met dolfyne?

'Ek sal jou terugskakel na die ontvangsdame. Ek sal bly wees as jy so gou as moontlik 'n afspraak kan maak.'

'Ja, Dokter.' Mary Catherine kan nie haar kop oplig nie, kan niks doen nie. Sy voel net hoe sy val. Wat van haar nuwe pos as artistieke ontwerper by die Front Line-ateljees in Santa Monica? Sy is veronderstel om volgende jaar daar

te begin werk.

'n Hartoorplanting?

Voor die einde van die jaar?

Sy val ... sy val. Mary Catherine staan op en hou aan die kant van die bed vas vir ondersteuning. Sy moet al haar krag gebruik om tot by die venster te stap. Sy kyk uit na die blou lug, die helder Suid-Kaliforniese lug. Hoe kon dit gebeur het?

Sy dink aan haar vriende. Sy sal vir Marcus moet vertel. Nie dadelik nie, maar gou. Sy sal hulle almal moet vertel. As sy net kan ophou val, uit die donkerte van hierdie swart gat kan kom. Voor die oproep het sy nog gedink sy het tyd tot sy dertig jaar oud is. Nog ten minste sewe jaar.

Dertig voel skielik na 'n onmoontlike getal. Soos 'n geskenk.

Miskien is daar iewers 'n fout. Sy voel immers gesond en sterk! Sy is nie uitasem nie, sy het nie borspyne nie. Mense wat op die waglys vir 'n hartoorplanting is, is baie siek. Te swak om soggens op te staan. Mary Catherine klou aan die vensterraam vas en dink aan die oggend, aan die gevoel van Marcus se arm teen hare. *Wat van sulke oomblikke, Here?* Sy gaan nie tyd hê om 'n verskil te maak, om kitaar te leer speel of sanglesse te neem nie.

Sy gaan nie lank genoeg lewe nie. Mary Catherine maak haar oë toe, maar die trane loop in elk geval oor haar wange. Die donkerte sluk haar in, en sy val nog steeds. Alles is nou anders. Alles gaan verander. En daar is nog iets wat sy sal moet prysgee. Die ding waaroor sy nou en dan grappies gemaak het, en waaroor sy soms gebid het. Daardie ding is nou heeltemal buite die kwessie.

Haar honderd jaar.

23



LEXY COULDN'T STOP SHAKING.

It was the morning of her prison tour. Mary Catherine and Marcus were going to pick her up and take her to the prison, an hour away. She stared at her full cereal bowl. She was too scared to eat. Too unsure about what was ahead.

Why had she agreed to the program? They wouldn't have given her very

long at Eastlake juvie, right? Less than a year, then she'd have been back on the streets. But going to prison? Even a day there would be terrible.

Prison was the sort of place that took a person in and swallowed them up and never let them see the light of day again. The way prison had done to her mother. Lexy looked at the photo on the wall across from her. She and her mama before the arrest. Lexy stood and walked to the picture. She touched it, running her thumb over their faces. In the photo her mama's arm was around her shoulders and their smiles were the same. Their eyes, too. The arrest came the next day, an afternoon Lexy thought about all the time. The day her mama was locked up and sent away.

The last day the two of them had seen each other.

Lexy might've been maybe six in the picture. Her mama, maybe twenty-two. Her mom was beautiful and intelligent. She could remember sitting with her mom on the couch that week and watching TV. *America's Funniest Home Videos*, Lexy could still remember. Her mom was laughing and so Lexy had laughed, too.

When she was little . . . Lexy could remember laughing a lot with her mama. Why had her mom gotten into drugs? She could've done something different with her life. So why didn't she? Lexy stared at the photo and blinked. The reason was obvious. No matter how long she looked at the photograph, no matter how the two of them seemed there on the wall.

Her mother didn't love her.

Lexy was alone after her mama went away. Her grandma tried, but she never knew what was going on in the house. The summer Lexy turned eight was the first time she remembered the neighbor boy locking her in his bedroom and taking advantage of her. He was fourteen. At least she thought so. It had happened too many times since then. The bad all blended together. And none of it would have happened if her mama had been around.

Mamas are supposed to keep their babies safe.

Supposed to keep their babies in school and out of gangs.

Lexy felt her anger rising, taking over her heart and soul. If she had a soul. One day when she had babies, she wasn't going to leave them. She would move out of the slums to some nice place like Reseda. Lexy's grandma was from Reseda. Nice town in the San Fernando Valley.

Gradually a resolve built in her.

She had prayed to God for help and he'd given her the chance at this program. It was a little late to start wishing she'd served time instead. If she was going to make a change for her own kids one day, then this was the only way.

The Last Time In program. Whatever happened today, she could deal with

it.

Her grandma's Bible was open again on the other side of the table. The way it was always open. *Hate evil . . . cling to good.* That's what the blond police officer had told her. And then he'd showed up again, right when Dwayne was going to kill her.

A sick feeling slammed into Lexy's stomach. Yes, Dwayne was definitely going to kill her. He had wanted to hide out at her grandma's house that day, but all of a sudden he looked at her like he was the devil himself and he ordered her back outside to the car.

"I can't have witnesses, baby. You gotta understand." That's what he told her. He said it again and again until they were almost to the car and then out of nowhere there was the blond police officer. Again. Towering and looking like he could take down a whole gang by himself.

Then the craziest thing Lexy had ever seen in all her life. The cop had appeared out of nowhere and grabbed the gun. That wasn't even possible. Anyone knew people couldn't just appear out of thin air.

But that's what the officer did.

Even that didn't scare Dwayne. Lexy thought the cop would shoot her boyfriend right there on the street. That's when she had shouted out for help from Jesus.

Lexy didn't understand it, even still. Didn't know why she had called out the name Jesus, but something about that moment seemed to change things for the cop. Like he blinked a few times and he took his finger off the trigger. After that Lexy knew he wasn't going to shoot.

He was too good for that.

Hate evil . . . cling to good.

She was reminding herself when a text came through on her phone. It was from one of the WestKnights. *You in or not, baby? You're mine tonight. Dwayne's gone. I got next dibs.*

She stared at the text. Just stared at it as the words cut their way through her. Then she texted back without thinking. *I'm in.*

She looked at it and her heart felt hard and dead again.

He sent one last text. *Be ready.*

Tears slid down her cheeks. Who was she kidding? She would never have kids if she could help it. But if she did, she'd be just like her mama. How could she not? She was too far into the WestKnights to back out now.

There would be no babies, no family, no little house in Reseda. No life different from the one her mama gave her. No way to hate evil when it was a part of the air she breathed.

The time in prison today would not be her last time in.

Hoofstuk 23

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L

exy kan nie ophou bewe nie.

Dit is die dag van die tronktoer. Mary Catherine en Marcus gaan haar kom opplaai en haar tronk toe neem, 'n uur se ry ver. Sy staar na haar bakkie ontbytgraan. Sy is te bang om te eet. Te onseker oor wat voorlê.

Waarom het sy ingestem om die program te doen? Sy sou tog nie lank by die Eastlake Jeuggevangenis moes bly nie, seker minder as 'n jaar. En dan sou sy kon terugkom strate toe. Maar om tronk toe te gaan? Selfs een dag gaan verskriklik wees.

'n Tronk is 'n plek wat 'n mens insluk, sodat jy nooit weer in die daglig kan uitkom nie. Dit is wat die tronk aan haar ma gedoen het. Lexy kyk na die foto teen die muur. Sy en haar ma voor haar ma se arrestasie. Sy staan op en loop tot voor die foto. Sy raak daaraan, vryf met haar duim oor hul gesigte. Haar ma se arm is om haar skouers en hul glimlagte lyk presies eenders. Hul oë ook. Haar ma is die volgende middag gearrester. Dis 'n dag wat gedurig in Lexy se gedagtes bly. Die dag toe haar ma weggeneem en opgesluit is.

Die laaste keer toe hulle twee mekaar gesien het.

Lexy was omtrent ses tot die foto geneem is, haar ma ongeveer twee-en-twintig. Haar ma was mooi en slim. Sy onthou nog hoe sy langs haar ma op die bank gesit en televisie kyk het. Iets soos die Cosby Show. Haar ma het gelag en daarom het Lexy ook gelag.

Toe sy klein was ... Lexy onthou dat sy en haar ma baie saam gelag het. Waarom het haar ma met dwelms deurmekaar geraak? Sy kon tog iets anders met haar lewe gedoen het? Hoekom het sy nie? Lexy staar na die foto en knip haar oë. Die rede is duidelik. Al kyk sy hoe lank na die foto, al lyk hulle twee ook hoe gelukkig.

Haar ma was nie lief vir haar nie.

Toe haar ma weg is, was Lexy alleen. Haar ouma het probeer, maar sy het nooit geweet wat in die huis aangaan nie. Die somer toe Lexy agt geword het, het die bure se seun haar vir die eerste keer in sy kamer toegesluit en gemolesteer. Hy was veertien. Altans, sy dink so. Dit het baie kere daarna gebeur. Al die slegte dinge is ineengestrengel. En niks sou gebeur het as haar

ma daar was nie.

Ma's is veronderstel om hul dogtertjies te beskerm.

Om te sorg dat hulle in die skool en weg van die bendes af bly.

Lexy voel hoe sy kwaad word, en hoe die woede haar hart en siel vul. As sy ooit 'n siel het. Eendag as sy babas het, sal sy hulle nie weggooi nie. Sy sal uit die ghetto trek na 'n goeie woonbuurt soos Reseda. Dis waar Lexy se ouma vandaan kom. 'n Mooi dorpie in die San Fernando-vallei.

'n Voorneme neem geleidelik in haar vorm aan.

Sy het die Here gevra om haar te help, en sy het 'n kans gekry met hierdie program. Dit is 'n bietjie laat om te wens dat sy liever in die jeuggevangenis gebly het. As sy 'n ander soort lewe vir haar kinders wil gee, dan is dit die enigste manier.

Die Laaste Keer In-program. Sy moet net deur hierdie dag kom, wat ook al gebeur.

Haar ouma se Bybel lê weer oop op die tafel, soos altyd. *Verafsku slegte dinge ... hou vas aan die goeie.* Dit is wat die blonde polisieman gesê het. En toe het hy weer verskyn, presies op die oomblik toe Dwayne haar wou doodmaak.

Lexy se maag trek skielik weer op 'n knop. Ja, Dwayne was beslis van plan om haar dood te skiet. Hy wou by haar ouma se huis wegkruip, maar ewe skielik het hy na haar gekyk asof hy die duiwel self is. Hy het gesê sy moet uitgaan en in die kar klim.

'Ek kan nie getuies hê nie, baby. Verstaan jy?' Dis wat hy gesê het. Hy het dit oor en oor gesê tot hulle amper by die kar is, en toe – toe verskyn die blonde polisieman net ewe skielik by die kar. Weer. En hy was groot en sterk; dit het gelyk asof hy op sy eie met 'n hele bende sou kon klaarspeel.

Wat toe gebeur het, was eers vreemd. Die polisieman het verdwyn en ewe skielik 'n paar huise verder verskyn. Maar dit is tog nie moontlik nie. Almal weet mense kan nie verdwyn en dadelik weer op 'n ander plek verskyn nie.

Maar dis presies wat daardie man gedoen het.

Dit het nie vir Dwayne laat skrik nie. Ook nie toe dit lyk asof die polisieman Dwayne net daar in die straat gaan skiet nie. Dis toe dat sy hardop uitgeroep het dat Jesus hulle moet help.

Lexy verstaan ook nie wat toe gebeur het nie. Sy weet nie hoekom sy Jesus se Naam uitgeroep het nie, maar van daardie oomblik af het dinge vir die polisieman verander. Hy het 'n paar keer sy oë geknip en sy vinger van die sneller afgehaal. Toe het Lexy geweet hy sal nie skiet nie.

Hy was te goed.

Verafsku die kwade ... hou vas aan die goeie.

Sy dink daaraan toe sy 'n SMS van een van die WestKnights af kry. *Jy in of nie, babe? Jy's myne vanaand. Dwayne is weg, ek is volgende op die lys.*

Sy antwoord, sonder om te dink. *Ek's in.*

Sy kyk na die woorde, en haar hart voel weer hard en dood.

Sy kry die antwoord: *Hou jou reg.*

Trane loop by haar wange af. Wat het sy gedink? Sy sal nie eens kinders hê as sy dit kan help nie. Maar as sy tog het, sal sy net soos haar ma wees. Hoe dan anders. Sy is te diep in die WestKnights om nou uit te kom.

Daar gaan nie babas, of 'n gesin, of 'n mooi huis wees nie. Geen lewe wat anders is as die een wat haar ma haar gegee het nie. Hoe kan sy slegte dinge verafsku? Dis deel van die lug wat sy inasem.

Haar toer deur die tronk gaan beslis nie die laaste keer in wees nie.

Dit sal die voorskou wees.

24



MARY CATHERINE COULD'VE WON an Oscar for how she pulled herself together and pretended to be fine. The acting had begun Friday night at the last training session and continued on to this morning when Marcus picked her up for the prison tour.

She was still in the dark hole, still falling. But she could see the light of day. If she didn't have a year left, she was going to live her days like never before. Starting today with the Last Time In program. This day wasn't about her.

It was about Lexy.

In the driver's seat beside her, Marcus seemed somehow aware that she was different. "You sure you're okay?" He'd asked her twice already. "Sorry. It's just . . . something in your eyes."

A smile lifted the corners of her lips. "I'm fine. Just tired. I was up late reading."

"Your pilot's manual?" He grinned at her.

"No, a novel." She told him the name. "My favorite author just had a book come out. I can't put it down." At least that much was true.

"I didn't know you were into reading." It sounded forced. Like he was trying to believe her. "Me, too. I love fiction."

"You do not." She laughed and she could feel the doubt in her eyes.

He raised his brow and pointed to himself. "Are you saying athletes don't read?"

"Not many of them." Even in light of her news, something about being with him made her forget everything but the moment.

"I take exception to that statement." He tipped his baseball cap to her. "This Southern gentleman loves to read. For real." His eyes stayed on the road. "When you finish this book that kept you up so late, I wanna read it." He glanced at her. "Deal?"

She was still laughing. "Deal."

The mood stayed light as they drove to Lexy's, but after they picked her up it changed. Lexy seemed completely shut down. More than she'd been the other day. Mary Catherine sat in the front seat next to Marcus and tried. "How were the last few days?"

Silence.

"Lexy." She kept her tone kind. "I know this isn't easy. But please answer me."

Silence.

"Okay, then tell me about your grandma. How does she feel about you going for the prison tour today?"

Again nothing.

Marcus reached over and gently touched Mary Catherine's leg. Then he shook his head briefly, as if to say it wasn't worth it. He mouthed the word *later*. Then he turned the radio to the local Christian station. Francesca Battistelli came on. The song was a new one Mary Catherine loved called "If We're Honest." She hoped Lexy was listening to the words.

Mary Catherine sang along. " 'Truth is harder than a lie, the dark seems safer than the light . . . ' " As the song played out a thought occurred to her.

The words applied to her own life as much as they applied to Lexy's.

Mary Catherine leaned back and let the lyrics wash over her. She loved every song by Francesca. This one and the one that had first given her hope that God might have more time for her than the doctors believed. The song was called "Hundred More Years." Mary Catherine looked out the window while the song played. Despite her best efforts at ignoring her own situation and trying to make today about Lexy, she felt the tears.

Life wasn't fair for her or for Lexy. Neither of them would likely ever have the lives they'd dreamed about. Mary Catherine's teardrops spilled down her cheeks before she could do anything to stop them. She wiped them with the back of her hand, careful not to catch Marcus's attention.

But he must've seen, because he reached out and took hold of her hand. He let the song play on, right to the last line . . . *If we're honest.*

Mary Catherine loved how her hand felt in Marcus's, loved that he would reach out and comfort her when he saw her tears. She smiled at him, no longer embarrassed by her watery eyes. Life was not all laughter and mornings at the beach.

It was okay to cry.

The music switched and it was Matthew West's "Strong Enough." Mary Catherine sniffed and settled into her seat. Crying might have been allowed, but it wasn't possible during Matthew's song. She sang along, quietly at first. " 'You must, you must think I'm strong, to give me what I'm going through.' "

Then, to her surprise, Marcus began to sing, too. Louder and more off-key than her. "We'd make quite a duo for *America's Got Talent*." He was still holding her hand and now he winked at her.

It was impossible to stay sad around him. Plus the words to the song were too powerful. Okay, so she needed a heart transplant. And sure, not everyone on the list received one. Maybe she did only have a year left.

But she absolutely refused to use her days trying to stop falling, trying to see past the blackness. There would be time to cry, yes. But she had to believe in the message of the song. Especially with Marcus singing it at the top of his lungs beside her. That God was strong enough for her. Strong enough for Lexy.

After a minute, he released her hand and pretended to sing into a microphone. "I'm ready for Fifteen Minutes."

From the backseat Lexy said her first words of the morning. "Maybe not yet."

"Hey now." He looked at her in the rearview mirror. "You barely know me."

"Still." Lexy sounded disgusted. But it was a start. A way to connect. A bridge they could maybe cross again later today.

The rest of the drive was upbeat, and Mary Catherine didn't have to pretend to be okay. She actually felt it. Not until they reached the prison and started across the parking lot did Lexy hesitate. "I feel sick. Maybe we should turn back."

Mary Catherine stopped with her and so did Marcus. The prison loomed in the near distance, a monolithic structure made of block walls and razor wire. Everything about it looked intimidating.

No wonder Lexy felt sick. She was probably terrified, something they'd gone over in training. Mary Catherine put her hand softly on Lexy's shoulder. "Lexy, we'll be with you." The girl didn't jerk away. Mary Catherine smiled. "You'll be fine. I promise."

“Yeah.” Marcus’s voice was light and easy. Another tool they’d picked up in training. “Besides, I can’t sing in there.” Marcus had removed his baseball cap and left it in his Hummer. He peered at Lexy, clearly trying to see past her walls. “It’s just a tour.”

Lexy gave him a rude look. “I know.” Whatever spurred her forward, she started walking again. “Come on.” She looked back at Mary Catherine. “We can’t be late. That’s one of the rules.”

They made their way past four security checkpoints, and then they were ushered into a large cement room with no windows and just one door. Tyler and Sami and the girl they were helping were already there. Sami had tried to meet the girl before today, but she hadn’t been willing to meet.

Which was too bad because, as it turned out, Sami and Tyler had Sierra Wayne’s friend. Alicia Grange. The girl was tiny with pale blond hair. She looked barely old enough to be in middle school, let alone fourteen. Grand theft and truancy? Mary Catherine hoped the program worked for the girl.

For all the girls.

Over the next ten minutes the room filled up until all six girls were present along with their chaperone volunteers. At exactly ten o’clock the door opened and six prison guards pushed their way in. All of them seemed angry and put out, upset they had to be there.

This was part of the plan. Mary Catherine knew it. So did all the volunteers. But it was another thing to see the angry guards coming at them. Mary Catherine had to remind herself that these were volunteers. That no matter how it looked in this moment, these men and women cared very much for the girls in the program.

As for the volunteers, they would be advocates for the teens, people the teens could turn to when the reality of the prison visit became too much. That was one of the differences between Last Time In and Scared Straight. The point was to build connections between the teens and the volunteers. That way the volunteers would have a better chance of helping the teens stay off the streets in the days and weeks, even years, to come. At least that was the hope.

Mary Catherine tried not to think about the years she might not have to influence Lexy.

The guards moved toward them. They had their clubs out, and two of them were slapping them against their hands. *Here we go*, Mary Catherine thought. She stood close to Marcus, with Lexy standing in front of them. Already she was shaking.

“Got a buncha girls wanna spend their lives in here, that right?” The biggest prison guard lunged forward so his face was inches from the first girl. “You wanna be here? You gonna be a career criminal, missy?”

“No.”

“That’s ‘No, sir’!” he screamed at her face. “Say it.”

“No, sir!” The girl’s voice could barely be heard.

“Louder!” He couldn’t have been more than an inch from her. “Say it louder!”

“No, sir! I don’t wanna be a career criminal, sir!”

The guard stepped back, his face an angry twist of knots. “That’s better.”

Mary Catherine had to remember to breathe. She could feel Lexy backing up, getting closer to her. Even in the first few minutes, Mary Catherine felt like the program was starting to work. Lexy was feeling a trust connection with her.

And the tour hadn’t even started.

The other prison guards stepped into the action. Each of them went to a different girl. A muscled guard moved up to Lexy.

“Your guy’s leader of the gang, right?”

Lexy didn’t answer. She cocked her head back, the way she’d done when Mary Catherine first met her.

“We got a smart one here, do we!” He moved closer to her. “You dating the leader of the gang? Talk to me, gang girl. You’ve got no rights in here.”

“He ain’t the leader yet.” Her words were soft, her eyes directed at the blank wall at the other end of the room.

“ ‘He’s *not* the leader yet. Sir’!” He enunciated each word for her.

Lexy put her hands over her ears. “He’s not the leader yet, sir.” She still didn’t sound very loud.

The officer towered over her, his physical presence intimidating to everyone in the room. “Next time you forget you’ll do pushups.”

For a brief moment, Lexy looked back at Mary Catherine. Terror flashed in her eyes. Mary Catherine nodded. Lexy had to obey. That was part of the program.

“Don’t look at your volunteer, gang girl.” He twisted his head so his face was almost up against hers. “I changed my mind. Next time is now.”

Lexy moved reluctantly to her hands and knees.

“You’re going to do pushups, gang girl. Hurry up!”

Mary Catherine knew this would be the hardest part. Watching the guards treat the kids like they were prisoners. It was part of the program. After all, if they kept on the way they were headed, they would wind up here. And this would be a part of their everyday life. Having a prison guard in their faces, ordering them to obey.

This treatment was important. But it was almost impossible to watch.

Lexy began doing pushups. She was stronger than she looked. Mary

Catherine would've guessed the girl wasn't quite ninety pounds. But her arms were strong.

Meanwhile, down the line the other guards questioned the teens. Some were being forced to do jumping jacks. Others looked terrified. One girl had to march to the opposite wall and back. Four of the six were crying by the time the guards stepped back and folded their arms. Lexy was one of those.

"Time for your fellow inmates. You make it back here, and these women will become your family. Your best friends." It was the first guard. He was still bellowing, still lunging toward the girls with every other word. "You don't wanna know everything they'll become to you." He looked at his fellow guards. "Right?"

"You don't want to know." One of the guards shook her head.

"We'll let *them* tell you." The shortest officer walked to the door. "Follow me."

Marcus put his hand on the small of Mary Catherine's back as they walked with Lexy into the hallway and down a corridor. On the way they passed a row of cells and every one they passed was teeming with angry women.

The inmates pressed up against the bars, shouting obscenities and gesturing to the girls. Mary Catherine wanted to turn back. She could only imagine how Lexy and the other girls must feel. *Please, God . . . let this work. It's so hard. Please speak to Lexy at the depths of her soul.*

At the end of the corridor there was another room—this one much larger. At least it appeared that way through the window. The short guard turned and faced the group. "This is where you meet your new friends." She unlocked the door.

All around the room, the guards unlocked the doors of the smaller cells and the inmates joined the group in the open space. The area had four cement tables, built into the floor, each of them with attached cement benches.

Otherwise the room was empty.

Sixteen prisoners came out and started walking toward them. The collective anger from them was like a physical force. Something Mary Catherine had never experienced before. She was tempted to put her hand on Lexy's shoulder but that wasn't allowed. The volunteers were supposed to be a presence of shelter, safety. Hope, even.

But they weren't supposed to interfere.

Suddenly Lexy crumpled to the ground. "No!" She turned around and glared at Mary Catherine. "You didn't tell me!" she shouted at the closest guard. "How come no one told me?"

Marcus took Mary Catherine's hand again. "Pray," he whispered to her.

"I am." She had no idea what was happening. But the meltdown seemed to

be caused by an inmate walking straight for Lexy.

A woman who looked almost exactly like her.

"No, Mama, no! You can't do this!" Lexy started to turn around and run for the door.

But the guard caught her by the arm and turned her back around. "What's the matter, gang girl? Didn't you think you'd see your mama here? You wanna be just like her, right?"

Mary Catherine felt the blood leave her face. Lexy had said that her mother was in prison. But Mary Catherine had no idea the woman was in this prison. Mary Catherine felt sick. This was turning out to be the worst idea ever.

"No!" Lexy was still trying to run.

This time the prison guard lowered his voice, as threatening as he could sound. "You keep throwing a fit and I'll lock your mama back up. Then you won't see her at all."

Lexy grew calmer. Tears streamed down her face as her mother approached. For a brief few seconds, Mary Catherine wondered if the woman was going to start crying, too. She looked upset. But then, just like the other inmates, she came to Lexy and started yelling.

"Don't cry, little girl. This ain't a place for tears," Lexy's mother snarled at her. "Last time I saw you, you was all sweet and pretty." She jabbed a finger close to Lexy's face. "Now look at ya! You a gang girl now, Lexy. That it? All cool, hanging with the boys." The woman couldn't have been very old. She looked like Lexy's older sister.

"Stop it, Mama." Lexy turned her head, her body convulsing with sobs. "I hate you! Leave me alone!"

Mary Catherine felt tears in her own eyes. The scene was too disturbing. Lexy clearly didn't know she'd see her mother here. Let alone have her mama turn on her this way.

"No, little girl!" Her mom shouted louder. "I will not leave you alone!" Her mom moved so she could get her face up close to her daughter's. "You wanna be here with me, I'll show you what it's like."

Her mom rattled off a list: the danger of showers, the way young inmates could get owned by older inmates. The way inmates could sell the young ones to other inmates for a pack of cigarettes.

"You hear that, daughter!" Lexy's mother yelled. "A pack of cigarettes!" She practically spat in Lexy's face. "You want this. Don't forget it!"

Lexy looked ready to faint. She was sobbing and only every so often did she manage to say anything. "Please, Mama. Stop it!"

Mary Catherine could feel her heart breaking. There was a reason for all

this. But watching Lexy's mom shout at her, yelling at her mercilessly, was more than Mary Catherine had planned for. Only one thing could be worse than this sort of prison tour.

Coming here forever.



ASPYN AND JAG had hovered over the prison tour from the beginning. It was the ugliest hour they'd spent on earth.

"I'm going to see the girl's mother." Aspyr nodded at Jag. "She's back in her cell already. You all right by yourself?"

"Go ahead." Jag looked like he understood. His job was to keep Marcus and Mary Catherine safe.

Instantly, Aspyr was an orderly ready to clean up after the prisoners. Her uniform was light blue and she had a mop bucket. She walked out of a janitor's closet and past a few cells to the one where Lexy's mother was. The woman was alone, her back to the others.

She was crying.

Aspyr slipped into the cell and shut the door behind her. "What's wrong, Camila?"

The woman spun around. Everything angry and hateful about the way she'd looked earlier was gone. She took a step back. "Who are you?"

"I'm new." Aspyr had one hand on her mop. "Gotta clean up. But I heard you crying."

It took a minute for Camila Hernandez to believe she wasn't in danger, that Aspyr didn't want anything from her. Aspyr started moving the mop slowly over the floor. So she wouldn't raise Camila's suspicions. This moment was for Camila alone.

"You didn't answer me." Aspyr moved her mop slowly in a circle between them. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Camila melted against the back wall of her cell. "My girl . . . she was in there. I haven't . . . seen her in so many years."

Aspyr slowed the mop. "You wanted to be with her, right?"

"I did." She covered her face with her hands. "I love her so much. I never stopped loving her. This is the last place I wanna see her."

Aspyr and Jag had figured this was going to happen. They knew Lexy's mother was an inmate here. And now Aspyr felt herself hurting for Camila. "You're doing the right thing. Don't give up." Aspyr set the mop aside and went to Camila. She took hold of the woman's hands. "Write your daughter a letter. Do it now. Do you have paper and a pen?"

The woman sniffed. "I do." She pulled a small plastic box from beneath

her bunk. “In here.”

“You write it. I’ll make sure she gets it.” Aspyn took a step back. “Your daughter will know you love her.”

“I miss her so much.” Camila allowed another wave of tears. “I wanted to run up and hug her. I missed . . . everything. All her growing up years. I’m the worst mama ever.”

“No.” Aspyn wanted Camila to hear her. “You’re doing everything you can to keep her out of this place. That makes you a loving mother.”

Camila shook her head. “She’ll hate me forever.”

“Write the letter.” Aspyn needed to go. Lunch would be over soon and she couldn’t be caught.

For a long time Camila only stared at the paper and pen. Then she sniffed and nodded. “I will.” She lifted hesitant eyes to Aspyn. “Can you help me?” She looked embarrassed. “I’m not . . . that good a writer.”

Aspyn felt her heart melt. “Yes.” She took the paper and pen from Camila. “Tell me what you want to say.”

“Okay. I’ll try.” The woman struggled to find the right words, but in the end the message was all hers. Camila seemed calmer. “You’ll make sure she gets it?”

“I promise.” Aspyn hesitated. “You ever pray, Camila?”

“I want to learn.”

“There’s a Bible study once a week in your cell block. Did you know that? Monday nights.”

“I never go.”

“Start.” Aspyn smiled at her. “God has plans for you, Camila. Even now. Even here.”

The woman looked dazed. Like the news was hard to believe. Aspyn couldn’t wait another minute. She nodded. “I’ll get the letter to Lexy.”

With that Aspyn stepped out of the cell and back into the closet, and disappeared.

Hoofstuk 24

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M

ary Catherine sou ’n Oscar kon wen vir die manier waarop sy haar reggeruk het en voorgee alles is fantasties. Die toneelspel het gisteraand by die

opleiding begin en vanoggend hou dit aan toe Marcus haar oplaai vir die toer deur die tronk.

Sy is nog in die donker gat, sy val nog. Maar sy kan lig sien. As sy minder as 'n jaar oor het, gaan sy elke dag ten volle lewe soos nog nooit voorheen nie. En sy gaan vandag begin met die Laaste Keer In-program. Vandag gaan nie oor haar nie.

Dit gaan oor Lexy.

In die motor is dit asof Marcus besef iets aan haar is anders. 'Is jy seker alles is reg?' Hy het dit al twee keer gevra. 'Jammer. Dis net ... daar is iets in jou oë.'

Sy glimlag effens. 'Nee, alles is reg. Ek is net moeg. Ek het laat gelê en lees.'

'Jou vlieglicensie-handleiding?' Hy glimlag na haar kant toe.

'Nee, 'n roman.' Sy vertel hom wat sy lees. 'My geliefkoosde skrywer, en sy nuwe boek het pas verskyn. Ek kon dit nie neersit nie.' Wel, dit is ten minste die waarheid.

'Ek het nie geweet jy hou van lees nie.' Sy stem klink onnatuurlik. Asof hy hard moet probeer om haar te glo. 'Ek ook. Veral fiksie.'

'Kan nie wees nie.' Sy lag en voel die twyfel op haar gesig.

Hy lig 'n wenkbrou en wys na homself. 'Wil jy vir my sê sportmanne lees nie?'

'Wel, nie veel van hulle nie.' Selfs al lê haar nuus so swaar op haar hart, is daar iets aan sy teenwoordigheid wat haar alles laat vergeet, behalwe hierdie oomblik.

'Ek neem ernstig eksepsie.' Hy lig sy bofbalpet na haar kant toe. 'Hierdie ware heer uit die suide hou van lees. Gedoriewaar.' Sy oë is steeds op die pad.

'En as jy klaar is met hierdie boek wat jou so laat wakker hou, wil ek dit graag lees.' Hy kyk vlugtig na haar. 'Sal jy dit vir my leen?'

Sy lag nog. 'Reg!'

Hul bui bly lig tot by Lexy se huis, maar nadat hulle haar opgelaai het, verander dit. Lexy is heeltemal geslote. Baie meer as die keer toe sy en Mary Catherine gaan stap het. Mary Catherine sit voor langs Marcus en probeer 'n gesprek aan die gang kry. 'Hoe gaan dit, Lexy?'

Stilte.

'Lexy, dis net goeie maniere om iemand te antwoord as hulle vir jou 'n vraag vra.'

Stilte.

'Goed, vertel my van jou ouma. Hoe voel sy oor vandag se toer?'

Sy bly steeds stil.

Marcus leun oor en raak aan Mary Catherine se been, skud sy kop sag asof hy wil sê dit is nie die moeite werd nie. Hy vorm die woord 'later' en skakel die

radio aan. Hy gaan na die plaaslike Christen-stasie. Hulle luister hoe 'n bekende sangeres een van Mary Catherine se geliefkoosde liedjies, 'As ons eerlik is', sing. Mary Catherine hoop Lexy luister na die woorde.

Mary Catherine sing saam. 'Waarheid is moeiliker as 'n leuen ... donker lyk veiliger as lig. En almal het 'n hart wat graag wegkruip ...' Toe die lied ophou, skiet 'n gedagte haar te binne.

Die woorde is net soveel op haar van toepassing as op Lexy.

Sy sit terug en laat die woorde van die lied deur haar gedagtes gaan. Sy hou van al die liedjies van die betrokke sangeres. Veral hierdie een en 'n ander een wat haar laat hoop het dat die Here vir haar meer tyd op aarde gaan gee as wat die dokters reken sy het. Die lied se naam is 'Nog 'n honderd jaar'. Mary Catherine kyk by die venster uit terwyl die sangeres dit sing. Ten spyte van haar beste pogings om haar eie situasie te ignoreer en op Lexy te konsentreer, voel sy hoe die trane opwel.

Die lewe is nie regverdig nie, nie vir haar of vir Lexy nie. Nie een van hulle gaan die lewe hê waaroor hulle gedroom het nie. Mary Catherine se trane loop oor haar wange voordat sy hulle kan keer. Sy vee dit met die agterkant van haar hand af, en probeer hard om nie Marcus se aandag te trek nie.

Maar hy moes gesien het, want hy steek sy hand uit en hou hare vas. Hy laat die lied verder speel, reg tot by die laaste reël: *Genade wag aan die ander kant ... as ons eerlik is.*

Mary Catherine hou van die gevoel van haar hand in Marcus s'n, hou van die manier waarop hy uitgereik het en haar getroos het toe hy haar trane sien. Sy glimlag vir hom, nie meer verleë oor haar huilerigheid nie. Die lewe is nie net lag en oggende op die strand nie.

Huil is ook goed.

Die musiek verander, en hulle luister na Matthew West se liedjie 'Sterker'. Mary Catherine snuif en sit terug. Huil is goed, maar dit is nie moontlik om te huil as hierdie liedjie speel nie. Sy sing saam, eers sag. 'U moet ... dink ek is sterk. Om my te laat deurmaak wat ek deurmaak.'

En toe, tot haar verbasing, begin Marcus ook sing. Harder en beslis van die noot af. 'Ons kan op *America's Got Talent* gaan sing.' Hy hou nog steeds haar hand vas, en nou knipoog hy vir haar.

Dit is onmoontlik om hartseer te bly as hy naby is. Buitendien is die woorde van die lied te opbeurend. Goed, sy het 'n hartoorplanting nodig. En ja, nie almal op die waglys kry 'n hart nie. Miskien gaan sy nog net een jaar lank leef.

Maar sy weier om die hele tyd te probeer om nie te val nie, te probeer om nie die donkerte te sien nie. Daar sal 'n tyd vir trane wees, beslis. Maar sy moet die boodskap van die lied glo. Veral as Marcus dit lustig langs haar sit en

sing. Dat die Here se krag genoeg is vir haar. En vir Lexy.

Na 'n rukkie los hy haar hand en maak asof hy met 'n mikrofoon sing. 'American Idol, hier kom ek!'

Van die agterste sitplek af laat Lexy vir die eerste keer van haar hoor. 'Ek dink nie so nie.'

'Hei!' Hy kyk in die truspieëltjie na haar. 'Jy ken my skaars!'

'Nogtans,' sê Lexy heel ergerlik. Maar dit is ten minste 'n begin, 'n manier om tot haar deur te dring. 'n Brug wat hulle hopelik later vandag sal kan gebruik.

Die res van die rit is vrolik, en Mary Catherine hoef nie te maak asof sy goed voel nie. Dit is hoe sy voel. Maar toe hulle by die tronk kom en oor die parkeerarea begin stap, loop Lexy al stadiger. 'Ek voel naar. Kan ons maar omdraai?'

Mary Catherine en Marcus staan by haar. Die tronkgebou toring in die lug op, 'n hoë gebou met kaal mure en doringdraad. Alles lyk intimiderend.

Geen wonder Lexy voel naar nie. Sy is waarskynlik doodbenoud – hulle het daarvoor gepraat tydens die opleiding. Mary Catherine sit haar hand sag op die meisie se skouer. 'Lexy, ons sal die hele tyd by jou wees.' Sy ruk nie weg nie. Mary Catherine glimlag. 'Dit sal goed gaan. Ek belowe.'

'Ja.' Marcus se stem is lig, gemaklik. Nog 'n wenk wat hulle in die opleiding gekry het. 'Buitendien, ek kan nie daarbinne sing nie.' Marcus het sy bofbalpet in die motor gelos. Hy kyk nou stip na Lexy, asof hy probeer om verby haar skanse te sien. 'Dis net 'n toer.'

Lexy kyk hom minagtend aan. 'Ek weet.' Sy begin weer loop. 'Kom.' Sy kyk na Mary Catherine. 'Ons mag nie laat wees nie. Dis een van hul reëls.'

Hulle moet by vier sekuriteitskontrolepunte verby gaan, en toe kom hulle in 'n groot sementvertrek sonder vensters en met net een deur. Tyler en Sami en die meisie wat hulle begelei, is reeds daar. Sami het probeer om die meisie die vorige dag te ontmoet, maar sy wou nie instem nie.

En dit is 'n jammerte, want sy is Sierra Wayne se vriendin, Alicia Grange. Sy is fyn en klein, en het ligte blonde hare. Sy lyk baie jonk, asof sy nog in die laerskool moet wees, maar sy is veertien. Sy word aangekla van diefstal en wegloop van die skool. Mary Catherine hoop maar die program kan die meisie help.

Al die meisies.

Nog vier ander meisies met hul begeleiers daag binne die volgende tien minute op. Presies om tienuur gaan die deur oop en ses bewaarders kom in. Hulle lyk kwaad en ontrief, vies omdat hulle daar moet wees.

Dit is deel van die plan. Mary Catherine weet dit, en so ook die ander vrywilligers. Maar dit is nogtans ontstellend as ses kwaai bewaarders op jou

afkom. Mary Catherine moet haarself daaraan herinner dat hulle almal vrywillig daar is. Hierdie mans en vroue gee baie om vir die meisies wat die program deurloop.

Die vrywilligers se rolle is dié van ondersteuners vir die tieners. Wanneer die werklikheid van die tronklewe te veel vir hulle word, kan hulle na die vrywilligers toe gaan. Dit is die verskil tussen hierdie program en die ouer een, Skrik wakker!. Een van die doelwitte van die program is om 'n band tussen die tieners en vrywilligers te bou, sodat laasgenoemde 'n beter kans het om die tieners te help om in die weke en miskien selfs jare wat voorlê, van die strate af te bly.

Mary Catherine probeer om nie te dink aan die jare wanneer sy nie meer daar gaan wees om Lexy te help nie.

Die bewaarders kom nog steeds nader. Hulle het hul knuppels in die hand en twee van hulle slaan daarmee in hul hande. Hier gaan ons, dink Mary Catherine. Sy staan langs Marcus, en Lexy is voor hulle. Sy is al klaar aan die bewe.

‘So, julle meisies wil hier by ons kom bly, of wat praat ek alles?’ Die grootste bewaarder beweeg nog nader, sodat sy gesig net ’n paar sentimeters van die eerste meisie af is. ‘Jy wil hiernatoe kom? Beplan jy ’n loopbaan in misdaad, juffie?’

‘Nee.’

‘Sê “Nee, Meneer!”’ Hy brul in haar gesig. ‘Sê dit!’

‘Nee, Meneer.’ Haar stemmetjie is skaars hoorbaar.

‘Harder!’ Sy gesig is feitlik teen hare. ‘Sê dit harder!’

‘Nee, Meneer! Ek wil nie ’n loopbaan in misdaad hê nie.’

Die bewaarder staan terug, sy gesig steeds vertrek van woede. ‘Dis beter.’

Mary Catherine moet onthou om asem te haal. Sy voel hoe Lexy terugstaan, nader aan haar. Mary Catherine voel dat die program reeds begin om resultate te behaal. Lexy voel dat sy haar wat Mary Catherine is in hierdie situasie kan vertrou.

En die toer het nog nie eens begin nie.

Die ander bewaarders kom nou deelneem. Elkeen gaan na ’n ander meisie toe. ’n Groot swart bewaarder kom na Lexy toe.

‘Jou kêrel is die bendeleier, of hoe?’

Lexy antwoord nie. Sy lig net haar ken, net soos sy gemaak het toe Mary Catherine die eerste keer vir haar gaan kuier het.

‘Aha, ons het ’n slim enetjie hier!’ Die bewaarder kom nog nader. ‘Jy gaan uit met die leier, huh? Praat met my, bendemeisie. Hier binne het jy nie regte nie.’

‘Hy’s noggie die leier nie.’ Haar woorde is sag, en sy staar na die muur aan

die oorkant van die vertrek.

‘Hy is nog nie die leier nie, Meneer!’ Hy spreek elke woord stadig en duidelik uit.

Lexy sit haar hande oor haar ore. ‘Hy is nog nie die leier nie, Meneer.’ Haar stem is nog steeds sag.

Die bewaarder toring oor haar en intimideer haar met sy fisieke teenwoordigheid. ‘Moenie vergeet nie, anders gaan jy opstote doen.’

Lexy kyk vinnig na Mary Catherine. Daar is vrees in haar oë. Mary Catherine knik. Lexy moet die man gehoorsaam. Dit is deel van die program.

‘Moenie na jou vrywilliger kyk nie, bendemeisie.’ Hy draai sy gesig sodat dit teen hare is. ‘Ek het van plan verander. Volgende keer is nou.’

Lexy sak stadig op haar hande en knieë af.

‘Doen opstote, bendemeisie. Maak gou!’

Mary Catherine het vooraf geweet dat hierdie deel, waar die bewaarders die meisies soos gevangenes behandel, moeilik sal wees. Maar dit is deel van die program. En sy moet onthou, dis hier waar die meisies sal beland as hulle met hul huidige lewe voortgaan. Dan sal hierdie soort lewe hul lewe word: ’n bewaarder wat in jou gesig skree, en jou allerhande bevele gee.

Hierdie behandeling is belangrik. Maar dis feitlik onmoontlik om net daar te staan en kyk.

Lexy begin opstote doen. Sy is sterker as wat sy lyk. Mary Catherine raai dat sy ongeveer 40 kg weeg, maar haar arms is sterk.

Die ander bewaarders is ook besig om die tieners te ondervra. Party tieners moet opstote doen, ander lyk beangs. Die een meisie moet na die muur en terug marsjeer. Teen die tyd dat die bewaarders terugstaan en hul arms vou, is vier van die meisies in trane. Lexy is een van hulle.

‘Tyd om jul medegevangenes te ontmoet. As julle ooit terugkom hierheen, sal hierdie vrouens jul familie wees. Jul beste maatjies.’ Dis weer die swart bewaarder. Hy praat nog steeds met ’n bulderende stem en druk steeds sy gesig teen dié van die meisies. ‘Julle wil nie weet wat hulle alles vir julle gaan word nie.’ Hy kyk na sy medebewaarders. ‘Of hoe?’

‘Julle wil nie weet nie.’ Een van die vroulike bewaarders skud haar kop.

‘Maar hulle kan julle sommer self vertel.’ Die kortste bewaarder gaan na die deur toe. ‘Volg my.’

Marcus sit sy hand op Mary Catherine se rug toe hulle saam met Lexy in die gang af stap. Op pad moet hulle verby selle vol vroue stap.

Die vroue druk teen die tralies, skree onweloweglikhede en wys allerhande tekens vir die meisies. Mary Catherine wil omdraai. Sy kan net dink hoe Lexy en die ander meisies moet voel. *Asseblief, Here ... laat dit werk. Dis so moeilik. Praat asseblief met Lexy diep in haar siel.*

Op die punt van die gang is nog 'n groot vertrek. Deur die venster lyk dit selfs groter as die vorige een. Die kort bewaarder gaan staan stil en draai na die groep. 'Dit is waar julle jul nuwe maatjies gaan ontmoet.' Sy sluit die deur oop.

Die vertrek het deure reg rondom en daaruit kom gevangenes te voorskyn. Daar is vier groot sementtafels in die vloer vasgebou, met sementbankies vas aan elke tafel.

Verder is die vertrek leeg.

Sestien gevangenes kom uit en pyl op die meisies af. Hul gesamentlike woede is soos 'n fisieke krag. Iets wat Mary Catherine nog nooit vantevore ervaar het nie. Sy wil graag haar hand om Lexy se skouer sit, maar dit word nie toegelaat nie. Die vrywilligers is veronderstel om slegs 'n teenwoordigheid te vorm van beskutting, veiligheid, miskien van hoop.

Hulle mag glad nie inmeng nie.

Skielik sak Lexy op die vloer neer. 'Nee!' Sy draai om en gluur Mary Catherine aan. 'Hoekom het jy my nie gesê nie?' Sy skree ook vir die naaste bewaarder: 'Hoekom het niemand my gesê nie?'

Marcus neem Mary Catherine se hand. 'Bid,' fluister hy dringend.

'Ja.' Sy het geen idee wat pas gebeur het nie. Maar die ineenstorting is klaarblyklik veroorsaak deur die gevangene wat nou na Lexy aangestap kom. 'n Vrou wat net soos Lexy lyk.

'Mamma! Moenie dit doen nie!' Lexy draai om en probeer na die deur toe hardloop.

Maar die swart bewaarder gryp haar aan die arm en draai haar terug. 'Wat's verkeerd, bendemeisie? Het jy nie gedink jy sal jou mammie hier sien nie? Jy wil mos net soos sy wees, dan nie?'

Mary Catherine voel hoe sy spierwit word. Lexy het gesê haar ma is in die tronk, maar Mary Catherine het nie geweet sy is in hierdie tronk nie. Mary Catherine voel naar. Hierdie besigheid gaan nie werk nie.

'Nee!' Lexy probeer nog steeds wegkom.

Hierdie keer praat die bewaarder sag, maar sy stem is dreigend. 'As jy aanhou om te kere te gaan, gaan ek jou ma weer opsluit. Dan sal jy haar glad nie sien nie.'

Lexy kalmeer effens. Die trane stroom nog teen haar wange af toe haar ma nader kom. Vir 'n paar oomblikke wonder Mary Catherine of die vrou ook gaan huil. Sy lyk ontsteld. Maar toe kom sy nader en begin op Lexy skree, net soos die ander vroue.

'Moenie huil nie, meisie. 'n Tronk is nie 'n plek vir trane nie.' Lexy se ma frons, en haar stem is kwaai. 'Die laaste keer toe ek jou gesien het, was jy soet en mooi.' Sy druk 'n vinger in Lexy se gesig. 'Kyk hoe lyk jy nou! Jy is 'n

bendemeisie. Nè, Lexy? Vreeslik vernaam, so saam met die bende-ouens.’ Die vrou lyk nie ’n dag ouer as dertig nie. Sy lyk trouens soos Lexy se ousus. ‘Hou op!’ Lexy draai haar kop weg, en haar snikke laat haar hele lyf ruk. ‘Ek haat jou! Los my uit!’

Mary Catherine voel trane in haar eie oë. Die toneel is net te ontstellend. Dis duidelik dat Lexy nie besef het sy gaan haar ma sien nie. Nog minder dat haar ma haar so gaan uitskel.

‘Nee, meisietjie!’ Haar ma skreeu selfs harder. ‘Ek sal jou nie uitlos nie!’ Haar ma kom nader, sodat haar gesig byna teen Lexy s’n is. ‘As jy hiernatoe wil kom, sal ek jou wys hoe dit hier binne is.’

Haar ma begin ’n hele lys dinge vertel: wat alles in die storte gebeur, hoe jong gevangenes deur die ouer vroue besit word, hoe hulle die jongetjies vir ’n pakkie sigarette sal verkoop.

‘Hoor jy, my mooi dogtertjie?’ skree Lexy se ma. ‘’n Pakkie sigarette!’ Sy spoeg omtrent in Lexy se gesig. ‘Moenie vergeet nie! Dis wat hier binne gebeur!’

Dit lyk asof Lexy wil flou val. Sy snik, en al wat sy uitkry, is: ‘Hou op. Asseblief, Mamma!’

Dit voel vir Mary Catherine asof haar hart breek. Daar is ’n rede hiervoor. Maar om toe te kyk hoe Lexy se ma met soveel woede op haar skree, is meer as wat sy kan verduur. Daar is net een ding wat erger as hierdie tronktoer kan wees.

Om permanent hier toegesluit te word.

~

Aspyn en Jag het van die begin af oor die tronktoer gesweef. Dit is die lelikste uur wat hulle nog op aarde deurgebring het.

‘Ek gaan na die meisie se ma toe.’ Aspyn knik vir Jag. Sy is reeds weer terug in haar sel. ‘Sal jy regkom op jou eie?’

‘Ja, gaan gerus.’ Dit lyk asof Jag verstaan. Sy werk is om Marcus en Mary Catherine te beskerm.

Aspyn is skielik ’n skoonmaker in die tronk. Sy dra ’n ligblou uniform en het ’n emmer en mop by haar. Sy kom uit die opsigter se kantoortjie en stap na Lexy se ma se sel. Die vrou sit alleen, met haar rug na die deur.

Sy huil.

Aspyn glip die sel binne en maak die deur toe. ‘Wat is verkeerd, Camila?’

Die vrou draai vinnig om. Haar kwaai uitdrukking van netnou is heeltemal weg. Sy tree terug. ‘Wie is jy?’

‘Ek is nuut.’ Aspyn sit ’n hand op die mop. ‘Ek moet skoonmaak. Maar ek het jou hoor huil.’

Dit neem 'n rukkie voordat Camila Hernandez glo dat sy nie in gevaar is nie, en dat Aspyn nie iets wil hê nie. Aspyn begin om die mop stadig oor die vloer te stoot. Sy wil die vrou nie agterdogtig maak nie. Hierdie tydjie is Camila s'n.

'Jy het my nie geantwoord nie.' Aspyn vee die mop stadig in 'n sirkel. 'Wat is fout? Hoekom huil jy?'

Camila gly teen die muur af. 'My dogter ... sy was daar. Ek het haar ... agt jaar gelede laas gesien.'

Aspyn se mop raak stil. 'Jy wou graag by haar wees, nè?'

'Ja.' Sy bedek haar gesig met haar hande. 'Ek is so lief vir haar. Ek het nooit opgehou om lief te wees vir haar nie. Dis die laaste plek waar ek haar wil sien.'

Aspyn en Jag het gedink dit sal gebeur. Hulle het geweet Lexy se ma is 'n gevangene in hierdie tronk. En nou kry Aspyn seer vir Camila se onthalwe. 'Jy het die regte ding gedoen. Moenie moed verloor nie.' Aspyn sit die mop eenkant neer en gaan na Camila. Sy neem die vrou se hande in hare. 'Skryf vir jou dogter 'n brief. Doen dit sommer nou. Het jy 'n pen en papier?'

Die vrou snuif. 'Ja.' Sy haal 'n klein plastiekdosie onder haar bed uit. 'Hierin.'

'Skryf dit. Ek sal seker maak dat sy dit kry.' Aspyn staan terug. 'So sal jou dogter weet jy is lief vir haar.'

'Ek mis haar so baie.' Camila se trane loop weer. 'Ek wou na haar toe hardloop en haar vasdruk. Ek het ... alles gemis. Hoe sy groot word. Ek is die slegste ma op aarde.'

'Nee.' Aspyn wil hê Camila moet haar woorde duidelik hoor. 'Jy doen wat jy kan om haar uit hierdie plek te hou. Dit doen net 'n ma wat lief is vir haar dogter.'

Camila skud haar kop. 'Sy haat my seker.'

'Skryf gou die brief.' Aspyn moet gaan. Die middagete is amper verby en Aspyn moenie gevang word nie.

Camila sit vir 'n lang tyd net en staar na die papier. Toe snuif sy weer en knik. 'Ek sal.' Sy kyk onseker na Aspyn. 'Kan jy my help?' Sy lyk skaam. 'Ek kan nie ... eintlik skryf nie.'

Aspyn voel hoe haar hart smelt. 'Ja.' Sy neem die papier en pen uit Camila se hande. 'Sê vir my wat ek moet skryf.'

'Goed, ek sal probeer.' Die vrou sukkel om die regte woorde te vind, maar op die ou end kom haar boodskap uit die hart. Sy lyk ook kalmer. 'Sal jy seker maak sy kry dit?'

'Ek belowe.' Aspyn bly 'n oomblik stil. 'Bid jy partykeer, Camila?'

'Ek wil graag leer.'

‘Daar is eenmaal ’n week Bybelstudie vir jou selblok. Het jy geweet? Maandagaande.’

‘Ja, maar ek gaan nie.’

‘Doen dit van nou af.’ Aspyn glimlag. ‘God het ’n plan met jou, Camila. Selfs nou. Selfs hier.’

Die vrou lyk verdwaas, asof die nuus te onwerklik is om te glo. Aspyn kan nie langer wag nie. Sy knik. ‘Ek sal die brief by Lexy besorg.’

Aspyn stap uit die sel en terug na die kantoortjie, waar sy verdwyn.

25



MARY CATHERINE WANTED NOTHING more than to take Lexy in her arms and comfort her. The poor girl. The day was dragging on, but Lexy never recovered from seeing her mother as one of the inmates. After lunch it was more of the same, and by the time the prison tour was finished, Lexy looked like she might pass out.

Tyler and Sami’s girl also spent most of the day crying. If Mary Catherine had to guess, she doubted the girl would ever steal again. School probably looked like a dream vacation compared with this.

Marcus stayed by Mary Catherine’s side as they ushered Lexy through the main space and into the corridor. They were halfway to the holding room where they’d started when a woman mopping the floors stopped Mary Catherine. “I got something for you.”

“What?” She stopped. The woman looked familiar, but she couldn’t place her.

“Here.” The orderly kept her eyes averted. She handed Mary Catherine a folded piece of notepaper. “This is for Lexy.” Then the woman put her head down and kept mopping.

The group was still moving, so Mary Catherine had no choice but to keep walking. “Did you see that?” she whispered to Marcus.

“What?” He looked behind them and back at her.

“That woman. She was mopping the floor.” Mary Catherine held up the letter. “She handed me this. Said it was for Lexy.”

Marcus looked back again. “There’s no one there.”

“She was just—” Mary Catherine turned around and stopped for a second. “Where is she? She handed me the note like five seconds ago.”

“Maybe she stepped into a closet. You know, to put the mop away.”

Mary Catherine started walking again, backward, and then turned around. Lexy was a ways ahead of them. “That’s so weird.” She gave Marcus a puzzled look. “She looked familiar, too.”

They reached the first checkpoint. None of them had been allowed to bring in phones or purses or anything else. Now they were checked again and Mary Catherine produced the letter. “This is a letter for our participant. From her mother.”

The prison guard took the letter, opened it, and read it. He shrugged. “Fine.” He nodded to Mary Catherine as he handed it back. “Put it in your pocket. Anyone asks you tell them Sikes said it was okay.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Mary Catherine could only imagine what Lexy’s mother might’ve written to her. How she had gotten the letter to the orderly and how the orderly had known to get it to Mary Catherine made no sense at all.

When they reached Marcus’s Hummer back in the parking lot, Mary Catherine did what she’d wanted to do all day. She hugged Lexy for a long time. “I’m sorry. About all that.”

Lexy resisted the hug. “I didn’t know . . . my mama was gonna be there. Someone shoulda told me.”

“We didn’t know either.” Marcus stood on her other side. “I’m sorry, too. Today was brutal.”

“Yeah.” Lexy slid past them and climbed into the backseat of the SUV.

They were on the freeway before the girl spoke again. “What happened to the boy?” Her tone was softer than before. “The one Dwayne shot?”

“He’s still in the hospital.” Marcus looked in the rearview mirror. “He’s in bad shape. Everyone’s praying for him.”

Lexy started crying again. Mary Catherine could hear her. Even through her tears, she managed to speak. “Can . . . we pray for him? Right now? Please.”

“We can.” Mary Catherine turned around best she could in her seat.

“Father, we’ve asked You before, but now we come to You again with Lexy. Lord, please give Jalen a miracle. Please wake him up and by Your divine touch, would You please heal his brain? Let him talk to his mama again and let him live the way he did before. We know it’s a lot, God, but You can walk on water. You can calm the seas with a whisper.” Her voice was raw with emotion. “We believe You can do this. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Through her tears, Lexy managed two simple words. “Thank you.”

In the front seat, Mary Catherine doubted the girl was used to saying *thank you*. The Last Time In program was working, like the training promised. But Mary Catherine had wondered if anything would pierce the darkness that surrounded Lexy Jones.

Until now.

Mary Catherine waited until they were fifteen minutes from home before she pulled out the letter. “Your mama wrote you something. She had someone give it to me before we left.”

At first Lexy didn’t seem like she was going to let them know she cared. She didn’t respond for five minutes. Then she muttered, “What’s the letter say?”

“You can read it.”

“No.” Lexy hesitated. “How ’bout you read it? I’m not that good at letters.”

It occurred to Mary Catherine at the same time it must’ve occurred to Marcus. Lexy couldn’t read. At least not very many words. Otherwise she never would’ve wanted two people she still didn’t know well to read the letter from her mother.

Before Mary Catherine opened it, she looked back at Lexy. “Has your mother written you before?”

“Never.” She raised her chin. “I hafta hear it to believe it.”

“Okay.” Mary Catherine unfolded the piece of paper and started at the beginning. “Here it is. ‘Dear Lexy, this janitor lady is helping me write this to you.’ ” Mary Catherine felt her heart react. The cycle of drugs and violence and illiteracy felt almost hopeless. “ ‘I’m so sorry for today. That wasn’t me in there. It was me acting. All I wanted to do when I saw you was run up and take you in my arms.’ ” Mary Catherine blinked back tears. “ ‘The way I used to do when you were little.’ ”

Marcus put his hand on Mary Catherine’s shoulder, silently lending his support.

“Keep reading.” Lexy didn’t sound as hard as before. “Please.”

Mary Catherine worked to find her voice. “ ‘I made so many mistakes, Lexy. I never should’ve gotten involved with that man. I wouldn’t be here if I could’ve said no. Instead I’ve spent every day since they locked me up sitting here and missing you. I think about what you must look like and how big you must be getting. I think about you in school making better choices than me.’ ”

Tears ran down Mary Catherine’s cheeks. She wiped them before they could fall on the letter. “You’re with your grandma and I know she’s a God-fearing woman. So I believe you can find the right way, Lexy. The way I missed out on. The right way is with God, baby.’ ” Mary Catherine blinked so

she could see. “ ‘I said I’d do the program today on one condition. If I could work with you. Because you see, baby, in those minutes even though I was yelling at you, I was near you. I could see your eyes and your face. The face I’ve missed so much.’ ”

Mary Catherine lowered the letter. She looked at Marcus and shook her head. “I can’t,” she whispered. “It’s too sad.”

Lexy leaned up as far as the seat belt would allow. “Is that all?”

Marcus gave her shoulder the slightest squeeze. He mouthed the words *You can do it*, neither of them wanting Lexy to know how difficult the moment was for Mary Catherine.

“No. There’s more.” She sniffed and lifted the letter again. “ ‘So please forgive me. I never wanted to yell at you. I wish I could see you every day, baby, but not in here. Not like this.’ ” Mary Catherine wiped her eyes again. “ ‘I keep a picture in my mind, Lexy. You and me when you were six years old. Kindergarten graduation. Grandma took our picture. All I want to do every day is go back to that time and do life over again. I’d learn how to be a better reader and writer, and I’d be there for you at nighttime, to read to you and teach you how to sound out words. I’d make sure you and I were safe, away from the gangs and shootings. And I’d spend every day showing you how much I love you.’ ”

From the backseat, Mary Catherine could hear Lexy sniffing.

She had to finish. She wiped her tears once more. “ ‘But, Lexy, baby, I can’t go back. We don’t get to do life over again. So, baby, please just know that everything today was an act. It wasn’t me. It was my way of keeping you out of here. And that’s the only way I have left to love you. My precious daughter. I just wish I could’ve hugged you before you left. I love you always. Every day. Even from here. Love, your mama.’ ”

If Mary Catherine hadn’t felt drained after the prison tour, she definitely felt it now. She folded the letter and handed it to Lexy. “I’m sorry. I wish you and your mama could’ve had this moment together. Away from everyone else.”

Lexy took the letter. “Thank you. For reading it.” She pressed the letter to her chest and looked out the window. Like she was seeing all the way back to the time when she was six years old. Her kindergarten graduation.

There was no room in the car for music or conversation. Not after that. Mary Catherine sank low in her seat and again Marcus reached out and took her hand. He’d been wonderful all day, attentive to her and Lexy, and always aware whenever the situation felt too intense. He had taken her hand or put his arm around her a number of times today.

She appreciated all of it. Especially now. He ran his thumb along her hand

and kept driving. Mary Catherine thought about the woman's letter, and the miracle it was that the janitor woman had found them before they left. Especially considering it was the only letter her mother had ever written to her.

All her life Mary Catherine had been aware of people less fortunate than her. While her parents dined at the country club, she would go with her youth group friends to serve dinner at the Nashville Rescue Mission. Her parents would vacation at Atlantis in the Bahamas, but when they started taking two or three trips there each year, Mary Catherine opted for mission trips to Africa and Guatemala instead.

Still, never in that time had she thought about this segment of life. The people behind bars. How desperate and defeating to wake up every day in those small cells. And then to know that the extent of your freedom involved the common space on the other side of the cold metal bars.

More than that, Mary Catherine had never thought about the families those prisoners had left behind. Yes, they all had done something to deserve punishment. Crimes against people and society. There was a reason they were in prison.

But what about Lexy? What had she done wrong? Her daddy was dead before her third birthday, and her mom was serving time before she stepped foot in first grade. No wonder the pattern of crime and punishment continued in the inner city. Kids had no one else to follow. Mary Catherine closed her eyes. *Lord, please let this program work for Lexy. I'll do everything I can—as long as I can. But we can't do this without Your help.*

They dropped Lexy off ten minutes later, and again Mary Catherine hugged her. "We'll be back to pick you up on Tuesday at six." She searched Lexy's eyes. "Okay?"

"Okay." For the first time since Mary Catherine had met the girl, she didn't look defiant. She looked lost and broken. The letter from her mother was still clutched tight in her hand. "Maybe someday . . . you can read me the letter again."

"I'd like that."

Lexy walked inside without looking back.

"What a day." Marcus held the car door open for Mary Catherine.

"So hard." On the way back to her apartment, they didn't say much. But once more Marcus held her hand. As if there was no way to get through a day like this without physical support. As she showered that night and turned in early, she thought about her heart. Something she hadn't thought about all day. So what if she didn't have much time left to make a difference? Her life mattered today. It had mattered for Lexy.

Right now that was enough.



JAG SAT NEAR Jalen's hospital bed. It was Tuesday afternoon and they'd been keeping watch over the child for nearly three days straight. He was off his breathing tube, but he still hadn't woken up. Today, though, something was different. Jag could sense a breakthrough.

Something about the aroma of prayer that had made its way to heaven. That had to be it. Orlon had told him and Aspyr before the mission began. Keep praying. Make sure everyone is praying.

There were times Jag wondered what people thought about prayer. Most humans didn't understand it. They thought God was a genie, someone to beg favors off . . . or a Father to turn to when things went wrong.

But that wasn't prayer at all.

Praying was simply talking to God. Of course, the Lord loved hearing from His people. Whether they were believers or not. When Marcus Dillinger asked his Twitter followers to pray, it started a tidal wave of sweet requests directed straight to heaven.

It wasn't that a child like Jalen needed so many voices praying on his behalf. God heard the desperate prayer of a single voice in a dark room. But sometimes something happened that caused the world to sit up and take notice. A time when miracles could sway a generation to believe in God.

Miracles amidst tragedies.

And in that way, God would be glorified. Which wasn't always easy for people on earth to see or understand.

"Do you feel it?" Jag looked at Aspyr. This mission had kept them busier than either of them had ever imagined. "Something's happening with the boy."

"Yes." Aspyr held out her hands. "It's God's energy. It's all around us."

"It'll be any moment now." Jag hovered closer to the boy. "Come on, Jalen . . . Jesus, breathe life into him. Please, Jesus. We need You now. Here. Please."

Aspyr was praying too, and there in the chair beside the bed, Shamika had never stopped praying. Even when she doubted, she kept seeking God's help. Never stopped believing.

Suddenly the boy made the slightest coughing sound.

Jag could hear the celebration starting in heaven. The other angels cheering as they watched. "Come on. Wake up, boy." Jag held his hands over the child's heart. "We feel You working, God. Be glorified through Jalen."

And with that the boy began to sputter. His mother was on her feet

instantly. “Jalen! Jalen, it’s Mama. I’m here, baby. Wake up, Jalen.” She began to cry, her voice desperate to see another sign of life from her son.

Again Jalen coughed and his eyes began to blink. They didn’t open. It would take a few minutes. But he was coming to. That much was certain. “Nurse!” Shamika ran to the door and yelled into the hallway. “Please! Someone come here! My baby is waking up.”

The miracle was unfolding. Jag felt the sense of deep wonder and awe, the feeling that never grew old. When death was denied the last word.

If Jesus were standing here, He’d be crying. Jag was sure. This was the reason He’d died on the cross. So that what was dead might live again.

“Jalen! Baby, I’m here.” Shamika hurried back to her son’s bed and put her hand alongside his face. Her hands trembled, and her voice was unsteady with the weight of her emotion. She kissed her son’s cheek and took hold of his hand. “I’ve missed you so much, Jalen. Please . . . open your eyes, baby.” She whispered low near his cheek. “Come back to me, sweet boy. I want to see you smile again. God, please bring him back to me.” She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it. “Jalen . . . Mama’s here!”

Again the boy tried to blink his eyes open, and this time his eyelids opened just a hint. Slowly his lips parted. He peered at Shamika. “Mama? I’m hungry!”

“Okay, baby. We’ll get you something to eat.” Then without hesitating, Shamika did what most humans forgot to do in a moment like this.

She fell to her knees. “Jesus, You did this! You gave me my boy back. Thank You, Lord. Thank You.” With words and tears she continued to give praise to Jesus, the One who had brought her son back to life, the One from whom all good things flowed.

Including this.

Hoofstuk 25

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M

ary Catherine wil bitter graag vir Lexy vashou en troos. Die arme kind. Die dag is lank en moeilik, en Lexy kan net nie herstel van die skok om haar ma onder die gevangenes te sien nie. Die toer gaan na middagete aan, en teen die einde daarvan lyk dit asof Lexy elke oomblik kan flou val.

Die meisie by Tyler en Sami het ook die dag omgehuil. As Mary Catherine

moet raai, dink sy nie die meisie sal ooit weer steel nie. Die skool lyk waarskynlik soos 'n droomvakansie in vergelyking met die tronk.

Marcus bly langs Mary Catherine toe hulle Lexy deur die gange help. Op pad na die saal waar almal bymekaar moet kom, kom 'n skoonmaker wat in die gang doenig is na Mary Catherine. 'Ek het iets vir jou.'

'Wat?' Mary Catherine gaan staan. Die vrou lyk bekend, maar sy kan haar nie plaas nie.

'Hierso.' Die vrou hou haar oë afgewend. Sy gee Mary Catherine 'n stukkie papier wat netjies gevou is. 'Dis vir Lexy.' Toe gaan die vrou aan met haar werk.

Die groep is nog aan die beweeg, en Mary Catherine moet saamgaan. 'Het jy gesien?' fluister sy vir Marcus.

'Wat?' Hy kyk om en toe na haar.

'Daardie vrou. Sy was besig om die vloer skoon te maak.' Mary Catherine hou die briefie in die lug. 'Sy het dit vir my gegee. Sy't gesê dis vir Lexy.'

Marcus kyk weer terug. 'Daar's niemand nie.'

'Sy het.' Mary Catherine kyk ook terug en gaan staan weer stil. 'Waar is sy? Sy het nou net vir my die briefie gegee.'

'Miskien is sy in 'n ander kamer in. Om haar mop te gaan bêre of iets.'

Mary Catherine begin weer loop, maar sy kyk steeds terug. Toe kyk sy weer vorentoe. Lexy is ver voor hulle. 'Dis vreemd.' Sy lyk onseker. 'Sy het bekend gelyk.'

Hulle kom by die eerste kontrolepunt. Hulle is nie toegelaat om selfone of handsakke in die tronk te bring nie. Nou word hulle weer deursoek en Mary Catherine haal die briefie uit. 'Dis is 'n briefie vir ons deelnemer. Van haar ma af.'

Die bewaarder neem die brief, lees dit en gee dit terug. Hy haal sy skouers op.

'Gaaf.' Hy knik na Mary Catherine. 'Sit dit in jou sak. As iemand navraag doen, moet jy sê Sikes sê dis OK.'

'Dankie, Meneer.'

Mary Catherine kan haar voorstel wat Lexy se ma geskryf het. Maar sy verstaan glad nie hoe die brief by die skoonmaker uitgekóm het, en hoe die skoonmaker geweet het vir wie om dit te gee nie. By Marcus se Hummer in die parkeerarea doen Mary Catherine wat sy al die hele dag wil doen. Sy hou Lexy 'n lang tyd vas. 'Ek is jammer. Oor die hele dag.'

Lexy staan styf en geslote daar. 'Ek het nie geweet ... my ma sal daar wees nie. Iemand moes my gesê het.'

'Ons het ook nie geweet nie.' Marcus staan langs haar. 'Ek is ook jammer. Vandag was verskriklik moeilik.'

'Ja.' Lexy glip verby en klim agter in die Hummer.

Eers toe hulle op die snelweg is, praat sy weer. 'Wat het met die seun gebeur?' Haar stem is sag. 'Die een wat Dwayne geskiet het?'

'Hy is nog in die hospitaal.' Marcus kyk na haar in die truspieëltjie. 'Dit gaan nie goed met hom nie. Almal bid vir hom.'

Lexy begin weer huil. Mary Catherine kan haar hoor. Deur haar trane sê sy: 'Kan ons ... kan ons vir hom bid. Sommer nou? Asseblief.'

'Ja, ons kan.' Mary Catherine draai om sodat sy na Lexy kan kyk.

'Vader, ons het al gevra, maar ons kom nou weer saam met Lexy na U toe. Doen asseblief 'n wonderwerk vir Jalen, Here. Laat hom wakker word, en raak hom aan sodat hy gesond kan word, sodat hy weer met sy mamma kan praat en soos voorheen kan rondhardloop en speel. Ons weet ons vra baie, Here, maar U kan op water loop. U kan die storm stilmaak.' Haar stem is rou van emosie. 'Ons glo U kan dit doen. In Jesus se Naam, amen.'

Deur haar trane kry Lexy net een woord uit: 'Dankie.'

Mary Catherine dink nie Lexy gebruik daardie woord dikwels nie. Dit lyk asof die Laaste Keer In-program werk, net soos die opleiding belooft. Mary Catherine het die hele tyd gewonder of iets die duisternis rondom Lexy sal kan binnedring.

Tot nou toe.

Eers toe hulle net vyftien minute se ry van Lexy se huis is, haal Mary Catherine die briefie uit. 'Jou ma het vir jou 'n briefie geskryf. Sy het dit vir iemand gegee wat dit weer vir my gegee het, net voor ons uit die tronk weg is.'

Dit lyk eers asof Lexy nie gaan wys of sy omgee nie. Sy bly 'n hele vyf minute stil. Toe mompel sy: 'Wat staan daarin?'

'Jy kan dit self lees.'

'Nee.' Lexy bly stil. 'Lees jy dit liever. Ek is nie so goed met lees nie.'

Mary Catherine en Marcus besef tegelyk dat Lexy waarskynlik nie kan lees nie. Of ten minste nie goed nie. Anders sou sy nooit toegelaat het dat ander mense haar ma se brief lees nie.

Voordat Mary Catherine die briefie oopmaak, kyk sy na Lexy. 'Het jou ma al voorheen vir jou geskryf?'

'Nee.' Sy lig haar ken. 'Ek moet dit eers hoor voor ek dit sal glo.'

'Goed dan.' Mary Catherine vou die briefie oop en begin lees. 'Liewe Lexy, die skoonmakervrou help my om vir jou te skryf.' Mary Catherine voel hoe haar hart ineenkrimp. Die siklus van dwelms en ongeletterdheid en geweld maak haar moedeloos. 'Ek is jammer oor vandag. Dit was nie hoe ek gevoel het nie. Dit was toneelspelery. Toe ek jou sien, wou ek na jou toe hardloop en jou vashou.' Mary Catherine sluk die trane weg. 'Ek het dit altyd gedoen toe jy nog klein was.'

Marcus sit sy hand op Mary Catherine se skouer in stille ondersteuning.

‘Gaan aan.’ Lexy klink nie meer so hard nie. ‘Asseblief.’

Mary Catherine moet hard werk om haar stem egalig te hou. ‘Ek het baie foute gemaak, Lexy. Ek moes nooit met daardie man deurmekaar geraak het nie. Ek sou nie hier gewees het as ek nee gesê het nie. Ek mis jou elke dag hier binne. Ek dink aan hoe jy moet lyk en hoe groot jy geword het. Ek dink daaroor dat jy in die skool is en dat jy beter besluite as ek neem.’

Die trane loop teen Mary Catherine se wange af. Sy vee hulle af sodat hulle nie op die brief val nie. ‘Jy bly by Ouma, ek weet sy glo in God. So ek glo jy kan ook die regte pad kry, Lexy. Moenie soos ek wees nie, Lexy. Die regte pad is saam met God.’ Mary Catherine knip haar oë sodat sy kan sien. ‘Ek het gesê ek sal in die program wees op een voorwaarde. Ek wou met jou werk. Want, al het ek op jou geskree, was ek naby jou. Ek kon jou sien, jou gesig en jou oë. Ek mis jou so baie.’

Mary Catherine laat die brief sak. Sy kyk na Marcus en skud haar kop. ‘Ek kan nie verder lees nie. Dis te hartseer,’ fluister sy.

Lexy leun vorentoe, so ver as wat sy kan. ‘Is dit al?’

Marcus druk haar skouer saggies. ‘Jy kan dit doen.’ Sy mond vorm die woorde, want hulle wil nie hê Lexy moet agterkom hoe moeilik dit vir Mary Catherine is nie.

‘Nee. Daar is nog ’n stukkie.’ Mary Catherine snuif en tel weer die brief op. ‘Vergewe my asseblief. Ek wou nie op jou skree nie. Ek wens ek kan jou elke dag sien, net nie hier nie. Nie so nie.’ Mary Catherine vee weer haar oë af. ‘Ek het ’n prentjie van jou in my kop, Lexy. Ek en jy toe jy ses jaar oud was. Die laaste dag in die kleuterskool. Ouma het die foto geneem. Ek wil elke dag teruggaan na daardie tyd, en weer oor begin. Ek sal leer om beter te lees en te skryf, en ek sal elke aand by die huis wees om vir jou te lees en jou te help om ook te lees. Ek sal jou beskerm teen die bendes en die skietery. En ek sal elke dag vir jou sê hoe lief ek jou het.’

Mary Catherine kan hoor hoe Lexy op die agterste sitplek snuif.

Sy moet klaar lees. Sy vee weer trane af. ‘Maar, Lexy, ek kan nie teruggaan nie. Ons kan nie die lewe oordoen nie. So onthou net ek het nie die dinge bedoel wat ek vandag gedoen het nie. Maar ek het dit gedoen om jou hier weg te hou. Dis die enigste manier hoe ek my dogtertjie kan liefhê. My dierbare dogter. Ek wens ek kon jou vashou voordat jy weg is. Ek is lief vir jou. Altyd. Elke dag. Hier in die tronk. Liefde, jou mamma.’

Mary Catherine voel selfs meer gedreineer as na die toer. Sy vou die brief op en gee dit vir Lexy. ‘Ek is jammer. Ek wens jy en jou ma kon by mekaar uitkom, waar daar nie ander mense saam met julle is nie.’

Lexy neem die brief. ‘Dankie. Dat jy dit gelees het.’ Sy druk die brief teen

haar vas en kyk by die venster uit. Asof sy terugkyk na die tyd toe sy ses jaar oud was en vir oulaas kleuterskool toe gegaan het.

Dit is stil in die motor. Geen musiek of gesprek sal van pas wees nie. Mary Catherine sit terug in haar stoel en Marcus neem haar hand. Hy was die hele dag wonderlik; hy was daar vir haar en Lexy en het agtergekom wanneer die situasie te swaar raak. Hy het 'n hele paar keer deur die dag haar hand vasgehou of sy arm om haar gesit.

Sy waardeer dit. Veral nou. Hy vryf met sy duim oor haar hand terwyl hy bestuur. Mary Catherine dink aan die vrou se brief, en aan die wonderwerk dat die skoonmaker dit vir hulle kon gee. Veral aangesien dit die enigste brief was wat Lexy se ma ooit vir haar geskryf het.

Mary Catherine het nog altyd geweet dat daar mense is wat minder bevoorreg as sy is. Wanneer haar ouers by die buiteklub gaan eet het, het sy en haar vriende etes by Nashville se nagskuiling gaan bedien. Haar ouers het gereeld in Atlantis gaan vakansie hou, maar sy het later verkies om op sendinguitreike na Afrika of Guatemala te gaan.

En tog het sy nooit gedink aan hierdie deel van die samelewing nie. Die mense in tronke. Hoe desperaat en afbrekend dit moet wees om elke dag in 'n sel wakker te word. En om te weet jou vryheid strek net so ver soos die koue gemeenskaplike ruimte aan die ander kant van die traliedeur.

Mary Catherine het ook nog nooit gedink aan die familieleden wat agtergelaat word deur daardie gevangenes nie. Ja, hulle het hul straf verdien. Hulle het misdade gepleeg teen mense en teen die samelewing. Hulle is nie sonder rede in die tronk nie.

Maar wat van Lexy? Wat het sy verkeerd gedoen? Haar pa is dood voordat sy drie was, en haar ma was in die tronk teen die tyd dat sy met graad 1 begin het. Geen wonder daar is 'n bose kringloop van misdaad en tronkstraf in die middestad nie. Die kinders het geen ander rolmodelle nie. Mary Catherine maak haar oë toe. *Here, laat hierdie program asseblief vir Lexy werk. Ek sal doen wat ek kan, so lank as wat ek kan. Maar ek kan dit nie sonder u hulp doen nie.*

Hulle laai Lexy by haar huis af en Mary Catherine gee haar 'n drukkie. 'Ons sal jou Dinsdagaand sesuur kom oplaai.' Sy kyk in Lexy se oë. 'Goed so?'

'Ja.' Vir die eerste keer sedert sy haar ontmoet het, lyk Lexy nie uitdagend nie. Sy lyk verlore en gebroke. Sy hou haar ma se brief styf vas. 'Miskien ... kan jy eendag weer vir my die brief lees.'

'Ek sal dit graag doen.'

Lexy stap by die deur in sonder om om te kyk.

'Wat 'n dag.' Marcus hou die kar se deur oop vir Mary Catherine.

'So moeilik.' Hulle praat nie veel op pad terug na haar woonstel nie, maar

Marcus hou weer haar hand vas. Asof dit onmoontlik is om deur so 'n dag te kom sonder fisieke ondersteuning.

Later, terwyl sy 'n stort neem met die bedoeling om vroeg te gaan inkruip, dink sy aan haar hart. Iets waaraan sy die hele dag lank nie gedink het nie. Wat maak dit tog saak as sy nie veel tyd oor het om 'n verskil te maak nie. Haar lewe het vandag saak gemaak. Dit het saak gemaak vir Lexy. Vir vandag is dit genoeg.

~

Jag sit naby Jalen se bed. Dit is Dinsdagmiddag en hulle hou nou al drie dae lank wag by die kind se bed. Maar iets is vandag anders. Jag voel aan dat 'n deurbraak naby is.

Dit moet die geur wees van al die gebede wat na die hemel opgegaan het. Orlon het voor die sending vir hom en Aspyn gesê hulle moenie ophou bid nie. Hulle moet ook seker maak dat almal aanhou bid.

Jag wonder soms wat mense oor gebed dink. Die meeste mense verstaan dit nie. Hulle dink God is 'n soort towenaar, of Iemand wat gunste en gawes uitdeel ... of 'n Vader na wie jy toe kan gaan as dinge verkeerd loop.

Dit is nie wat gebed is nie.

Gebed is om met God te praat. Natuurlik wil God graag van sy mense hoor, of hulle gelowig is of nie. Toe Marcus Dillinger sy Twitter-volgeling gevra het om te bid, het dit 'n tsoenami van versoeke tot die hemel begin.

'n Kind soos Jalen het natuurlik nie soveel mense se gebede nodig nie. God hoor die opregte gebed van 'n enkele mens in 'n donker kamer. Maar soms gebeur iets wat die wêreld laat regop sit en aandag gee. Dis dan wanneer 'n wonderwerk baie mense tot geloof kan bring.

'n Wonderwerk te midde van 'n tragedie.

En dan sal God verheerlik word. Iets wat nie maklik is vir die mense op aarde om raak te sien of te verstaan nie.

'Voel jy dit ook?' Jag kyk na Aspyn. Hierdie sending hou hulle besiger as wat hulle ooit kon droom. 'Iets is besig om met die seun te gebeur.'

'Ja.' Aspyn hou haar hande uit. 'Dis energie. Ek voel dit om ons.'

'Dit kan nou enige oomblik gebeur.' Jag sweef nader aan die seun. 'Kom, Jalen ... Jesus, raak hom aan dat hy kan lewe. Asseblief, Here Jesus. Ons het u nodig. Asseblief.'

Aspyn bid ook en Shamika, op haar stoel langs die bed, het nog nooit opgehou nie. Selfs wanneer sy twyfel, soek sy God se hulp. En sy het nog nooit opgehou glo nie.

Skielik maak die seun 'n sagte hoësgeluidjie.

Jag hoor hoe die feesviering in die hemel begin. Hoe die ander engele begin

juig daar waar hulle afkyk op die hospitaal. 'Kom. Wakker word, Jalen.' Jag hou sy hande oor die kind se hart. 'Ons kan voel hoe U werk, Here. Mag u Naam verheerlik word deur Jalen se lewe.'

Die seun begin weer hoes. Sy ma is dadelik op haar voete. 'Jalen! Jalen, dis Mamma. Ek is hier. Word wakker, Jalen.' Sy begin huil, desperaat om verdere tekens van lewe in haar seuntjie te sien.

Jalen hoes weer en knip sy oë. Maar hy kry hulle nie oop nie. Dit sal nog 'n rukkie neem. Maar hy is aan die wakkerword, dis seker. 'Suster!' Shamika hardloop na die deur en roep in die gang af. 'Asseblief! Kom hiernatoe! Jalen is besig om wakker te word.'

Die wonderwerk vind voor hul oë plaas. Jag ervaar 'n gevoel van verwondering en ontsag, 'n gevoel waaraan hy nooit gewoon sal raak nie. Die dood kry nie die laaste woord in nie.

Jag is seker dat as Jesus hier was, Hy sou gehuil het. Dit is tog een van die redes waarom Hy gesterf het: om lewe te bring.

'Jalen! Mamma is hier by jou!' Shamika draf terug na haar seun se bed en sit haar hand langs sy gesiggie. Haar hande en haar stem bewe van emosie. Sy soen haar seun se wang en hou sy hand vas. 'Ek het jou gemis, Jalen! Maak nou jou oë oop, toe.' Sy fluister by sy oor. 'Kom terug na ons toe, liewe kind. Ek wil weer jou glimlag sien. Here, bring hom terug.' Sy lig sy handjie op en soen dit. 'Jalen ... Mamma is hier.'

Die seun probeer weer sy oë oopmaak, en hierdie keer kry hy dit reg. Hy glimlag. Hy kyk na sy ma. 'Mamma? Ek is honger!'

'Goed. Ons sal vir jou iets bring om te eet.' En toe doen Shamika iets wat die meeste mense vergeet.

Sy val op haar knieë neer. 'Jesus, U het my seun vir my teruggegee. Dankie, Here. Dankie.' In trane prys sy die Here, die Een wat haar seun laat lewe het, die Een van wie alle goeie gawes kom.

Ook hierdie een.



MARCUS WASN'T SURE WHAT he had expected from the first group meeting with the girls, but he had never imagined this. They met at six o'clock that Tuesday in a classroom at the police station—one of the requirements. Tyler and Sami sat with Alicia, the small blond girl, and Marcus and Mary Catherine sat with Lexy.

Just the six of them.

But the topics that had come up made Marcus glad for the training. On the surface the girls looked very young. Too young to be in trouble. But they were sadly wise beyond their years. Today's focus was on the difference between love and abuse.

Since they were allowed to discuss God in the group meeting—as long as the participants were willing, and they were—Marcus started the meeting with God's definition of love. He read it straight from 1 Corinthians 13 in his Bible.

“‘Love is patient; love is kind.’ ” Marcus looked up at the two girls. They seemed despondent. Like they weren't listening at all. He kept reading. “‘Love isn't envious, doesn't boast, brag, or strut about. There's no arrogance in love; it's never rude, crude, or indecent—it's not self-absorbed. Love isn't easily upset.’ ”

Lexy was the first to roll her eyes. Marcus stopped reading and waited for her to speak. Finally she tossed her hands up. “Okay.” Hurt filled her tone. “You want to talk about ‘love isn't rude’? Dwayne's rude all the time.” She looked at Alicia at the other side of the table. “That's how guys are, right?”

“Definitely.” The girl fidgeted, twisting her fingers together. Clearly uncomfortable. “Love always means someone's angry.”

For the next half hour they talked about how for these girls love felt the exact opposite of how it was described in the Bible. Lexy announced that last week Dwayne had threatened to kill her.

“See, Lexy?” Mary Catherine's voice was kind. “That's what we're talking about today. Dwayne has harmed you emotionally and physically. That's not love.”

Marcus loved watching Mary Catherine in this setting. It was like she was

made for this role. She looked past Lexy's exterior hardness and spoke to the girl's heart. Now that their time together was winding down, both girls had opened up a little.

Lexy talked about the guys she'd had before Dwayne, and Alicia talked about her current boyfriend. Though Alicia's crimes involved theft, her relationships had apparently been equally bad for her. Marcus's heart hurt for the young girls. It would take more than ninety minutes to teach them that abuse was not the same as love.

But they had made more progress than Marcus dreamed.

It was like Officer Kent had told them at the first day of training. These kids were starving for someone to invest in them, to care enough to listen and give guidance. Sure, they'd throw up ten-foot walls at the beginning. They might do that at every meeting. But eventually they'd talk, and then there were only two rules for the volunteers.

Listen. And don't act shocked.

Which was hard, Marcus had to admit. Where were the people who were supposed to care for these girls and cherish them? Because of neglect or lack of supervision or bad patterns, their lives had been destined for violence and abuse, crime and even prison.

Today's meeting, though, proved there was hope. The girls were talking and they were listening. That was a better start than he had expected for their first gathering.

When the meeting was over, they took the girls to Dairy Queen. Part of the program was introducing normal moments, where the girls could be kids. Marcus couldn't believe how easily the girls laughed and enjoyed themselves. A different environment changed everything.

They were about to leave when Mary Catherine's phone rang. She stepped away to answer it and almost at the same time her eyes lit up. "He is! That's amazing!" She put her hand to her mouth and shook her head. "Shamika, I can't believe that. Yes, I'll tell them." Her eyes shone with unshed tears, her smile filling her face. "It's a miracle for sure."

The call ended and she motioned the others close. Lexy and her new friend came closer, clearly interested. "What happened?" Lexy was the first to ask.

"Jalen's awake! He's talking to his mama."

"That's amazing." Marcus came to Mary Catherine first, and then Sami and Tyler did the same. They formed a circle, their arms around each other.

"I can't believe it." Sami's eyes welled with tears. "This is the best news."

Marcus felt his knees shaking. "He wasn't supposed to live."

"I know." Mary Catherine's eyes shone with joy. "Now they think his brain will be fine!"

“Wow . . . thank God!” Marcus whispered the words. He loved that they were all together when the news came in. His Twitter followers were still spreading the word, still getting people all over the world to pray for the boy.

“Should we go there?” Sami sounded hopeful. “I’d love to see him.”

“Maybe tomorrow. Shamika said the doctors are doing tests.” Mary Catherine opened up the circle, her eyes on Lexy and Alicia, who were standing awkwardly a few feet away.

“We can all go together.” Tyler sounded thrilled. “I’ve seen God do a lot of things, but this is at the top of the list.”

Marcus put his arm around Mary Catherine’s shoulders. Their friendship was more comfortable now. So much of what they’d been through together had been intense. He wanted to be there for her, to be available in the highs and lows.

And this was one of the highest highs of all.

Only then did Marcus notice Lexy. The girl had her hands over her face, her back turned to them. He watched her walk slowly outside, like she was in a trance, and sit at one of the tables. Again she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking.

“What’s up?” Marcus looked at Mary Catherine.

A knowing look came into her pretty green eyes. “I think I know.” She motioned for him to follow her. “Come on. Let’s go talk.”

Tyler and Sami stayed inside with Alicia. Marcus led the way, opening the door for Mary Catherine as they joined Lexy at the table. Mary Catherine sat next to her and put her hand on the girl’s back. “Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

Lexy was sobbing. Marcus realized the great changes happening in the girl. She had been so hard when Mary Catherine first met her. But at the prison tour and again today, her heart was plain for all of them to see. She still had miles to go if the journey was to make a difference. But these moments of opening up with her emotions were another beautiful answer to their prayers.

After a minute, Lexy lifted her head. Her eyes were red, her face wet. “Nothing.”

Marcus was confused. “Nothing’s wrong?”

“No.” She sniffed, and another few sobs came over her. “I told God if He was real, then He needed to save that . . . that little boy.” She shook her head. “I didn’t believe He could do it.” She covered her face with one hand this time. “So He must be real.” She looked at them again. “God must be real.”

There was a stinging in Marcus’s eyes as he watched the scene. Mary Catherine slid closer to the girl and put her arm around her back. “That’s right. He is real. And He loves you, Lexy. More than you could understand.”

“I thought I’d pick something really hard.” She wiped her cheeks with the

backs of her hands. "Something only God could do. If there was a God." The sobs were still coming. "But . . . but if there's a God, then why would He love me after . . . after all the things I've done?"

They had so far to go. Marcus drew a deep breath. "Lexy, we all have things we shouldn't have done. God wants us to be sorry for that and tell Him. Then, well, we can have a fresh start. A new life."

"For me?" The hardness flashed in her eyes again. "In my neighborhood? It'll take more than that where I come from."

"Maybe there's another way." Marcus refused to feel defeated. "There's always another way with God."

Lexy thought about that and slowly she nodded. A smile lifted the corners of her lips and she turned to Mary Catherine. "When you go see the boy tomorrow . . . can I go?"

Mary Catherine shared a quick look with Marcus. There might be legal reasons why Lexy shouldn't go to the hospital. After all, she'd been in the car with Dwayne when the shot was fired. Mary Catherine moved closer to Lexy and looked intently into her eyes. "I'll see what I can do."

"I know . . . you probably think the mama wouldn't want me." She sniffed. "All I wanna do is tell 'em I'm sorry."

"Okay." Mary Catherine was beyond kind. "I'll talk to them. I'm sure they'll be so glad you're sorry. And that you were praying."

Lexy nodded again. "I need to get home. I told my grandma I wouldn't be late."

Tyler and Sami and Alicia came out then and said their goodbyes. "I have to work early tomorrow." Sami made a face. "I'm thinking about quitting. Finding a job that really matters." She and Tyler shared a smile. "We'll see! Mary Catherine is rubbing off on me."

Marcus and Mary Catherine took Lexy home, too, and the minute they were back in the car alone, Marcus felt his heart soar. "You have time for dinner? We could pick something up and take it to my house?"

It looked like Mary Catherine might say no, find some reason why they couldn't spend another few hours together. But then she found her best teasing smile. "I could cook."

"Organic, no sugar, no bread." Marcus laughed. "Or . . . we could get pizza?"

Mary Catherine pressed her shoulder into the seat. "Seriously. I'll make you almond chicken. It'll be better than pizza. Promise!"

"Actually, that sounds pretty amazing."

They went to Whole Foods near his house and picked up the ingredients. Then they worked together in the kitchen. "You be my sous chef. How's that

sound?"

"It sounds like a girl's name." He washed his hands. "But if you have to call me Sue to pull off this meal, go ahead." His computer was on a desk at the edge of the kitchen. He turned on Pandora and found a piano station.

Mary Catherine was trying to explain that the word *sous* meant he was her assistant for the night. "Just think." She grinned as she handed him an onion and a bell pepper. "You might fall in love with organic cooking. The way I did. This night could change your life."

She turned to the sink and Marcus stood there, just watching her.

He had never met anyone like her, the way she didn't care what people thought of her, the way she grabbed onto life like every day might be her last. He smiled. Yes, he might fall in love, and no question this night could change his life. But if that happened it would have nothing to do with the cooking.

The chicken was in a colander and Mary Catherine was separating the pieces. She looked over her shoulder. "Hey. You're supposed to be mincing those."

"Mincing." He found a knife and a cutting board. "I know cutting and slicing. I believe you were going to give me a demonstration on mincing. Wasn't that it?"

She moved to the adjacent sink, washed her hands, and dried them on a clean towel. "Okay." She came to him, her eyes sparkling. Night had fallen and it was just the two of them in the house. "Step aside."

He did, but not too far. The smell of her perfume filled his senses and made him wish they were more than a couple of friends making dinner together. She took the teaching seriously. "Mincing is smaller, neater." She cut a slice of the onion and then, using small movements, she turned the slice into tiny squares no bigger than the head of an eraser.

"Looks like a lot of work." Marcus laughed. "You sure we can't just slice them?"

"It's not hard. Here." She handed him the knife. "You try it."

He was utterly aware of her presence, the way their arms touched, the movement of her hands. He took the knife and gave it a try. The work was tedious, but he managed it.

"Perfect!" She leaned closer, moving the pile of minced onions to the side. "You got it?"

He wanted to take her in his arms and dance across the kitchen, forget about the onions and everything. Everything but her. Instead he did a slight bow. "Glad it meets your approval, Miss."

She giggled at him. "You sure you weren't raised in the South?"

"I wish." He held her eyes. "Maybe I would've met you sooner."

His words seemed to touch her deeply. Her laughter softened and she smiled at him. "I would've liked that."

"Me, too." He looked at the onions. "Better get cooking."

When it came time to prepare the chicken, Mary Catherine made a mixture with almond flour and spices. She dipped each small boneless chicken piece into a bowl of almond milk and then coated it with the almond flour. In the pan, she melted coconut oil and fried the chicken in that.

"Uh, can I just say . . ." Marcus hadn't smelled something so good in months. "You can cook dinner at my house anytime."

"Told you it would change your life." She kept the teasing tone. Probably because it was safe and fun, given her determination that she didn't want more than a friendship.

Marcus didn't care. He only wanted to be with her. The teasing was fun for him, too. He sautéed the minced vegetables along with sliced zucchini and they ate out on his deck. The night was unseasonably warm. Still seventy-five when they sat down to eat.

"It's beautiful here." Mary Catherine looked out over Silver Lake. "Sami told me about the view."

"You need to come over more often." The meal was perfect. But it was nothing to how wonderful it felt sitting here with her, outside of training or prisons or anything to do with the youth center. It reminded him of that first walk. Before the shooting.

"So the Wayne family lives around the corner?" Mary Catherine grinned at him. "No wonder you're so close with them."

"Rhonda loved you. She really wants to get to know you better."

"I'd like that."

"By the way." Marcus held up a bite of the almond chicken. "You've sold me. Organic cooking definitely just changed my life." He chuckled. "Seriously, I had no idea it would be this good."

"Food the way God made it actually tastes better. That was one of the things I had to learn."

"So you really don't eat sugar or bread? Like ever?"

Mary Catherine laughed. "You make it sound like a punishment."

"I guess I can't imagine." He took another bite. "Tell me you didn't want ice cream earlier."

"Sure, it tastes good. But I didn't want it." She raised her brow. "Sugar causes disease. Diabetes. Dementia." She gave him a silly look. "And yes. I do eat pizza once in a while. I'm not perfect."

He stared at her, studying her. Memorizing her high cheekbones and the shine in her eyes. "Awfully close."

She smiled. "You're too kind."

"Just honest."

They finished their meal, and the whole time their conversation was easy and fun. Marcus could feel himself falling into her gravity, but he didn't care. The sensation was mesmerizing. Together they carried the dishes in and Mary Catherine looked back at him. "When will Tyler be home?"

"I think he and Sami went to the movies." He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the time. "Probably not for another hour."

Mary Catherine nodded. They worked rinsing their plates and scrubbing pans. The whole time Marcus tried to think of a reason to make her stay. It was just after nine o'clock. "You don't work tomorrow, right?" He gave her a hopeful look.

"I don't. The studio's closed every other Wednesday." She dried her hands on the towel.

"Can you stay? For a little while?"

"Well . . ." She seemed to struggle with the idea. But then she smiled and slipped her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "I noticed your pool table."

She was constantly surprising him. "You play?"

"Play?" She cocked her chin. "I thought about going pro. Decided it would take too much time."

The air between them was electric. Marcus was grateful for the distraction of a pool game. "Well, then . . . rack 'em up."

Halfway through the first game, Marcus started to laugh. "I thought you were kidding. About going pro."

"Never." She feigned an innocent look. "I never tease, Marcus. Not ever."

"Not about pool. That much is for sure." She was three balls ahead of him. "You could win a fortune at this. How'd you learn?"

"Played with my dad." Mary Catherine held her cue stick at her side and smiled. "It was the way we connected."

Marcus shook his head. "The man taught you well."

They played two games, and she won them both. "I could suggest best of five. But I'm afraid that would become best of seven at this rate."

Her laughter mixed with the piano music drifting through the house. "Maybe something less competitive."

"I have backgammon." He nodded toward a shelf in the family room. "Nobody touches me at backgammon."

"Next time." She smiled. "I should go."

"It's early." He didn't break eye contact with her. "Let's step out back again. The stars are probably just perfect." He reached for her hand and hesitated, drawn to her in a way he could barely fight. But she had made

herself clear at the beach. He couldn't push for more. "Come on." He walked with her outside and they took up their spots at the railing, staring at the lake.

"You were right." She lifted her face to the sky. "The stars are gorgeous."

"I don't come out here often enough. You can feel God on nights like this."

"Mmmm. I like how you said that." She put her head on his shoulder. "You're right. I can feel Him, too."

Marcus was losing the fight. Why would she put her head on his shoulder if she only wanted to be friends? He slipped his arm around her waist and they stayed that way, the music falling all around them.

A buzzing came from Mary Catherine's phone. "Sorry." She pulled it from her pocket. "I'll turn it off."

But before she did, she looked at the message. "It's from Shamika." Mary Catherine adjusted the brightness so she could read it. "She says Jalen is doing even better." A soft gasp came from her. "The doctors think he'll make a full recovery!" She texted back as quickly as her fingers could move. "Amazing!" She turned her phone off and slid it back into her pocket.

Then, as if it were the most natural thing, she hugged him, impulsively linking her arms easily around the back of his neck. "I can't believe it. So much has happened. So many highs and lows. I mean, only God." Her laugh was part surprise, part relief.

Marcus slipped his arms around her waist. "I wondered how I'd go on. At the youth center." He spoke near her face. "If the boy never woke up."

The hug was meant as a celebration. One of those extreme highs they'd shared over the last week. Except after a few seconds, neither of them seemed to want to let go. She rested her head on his shoulder again. The song was something instrumental by Chicago.

He leaned back, searching her eyes. "Wanna dance?"

"I'm not very good at it." Her voice fell to a whisper as they started to sway.

"I doubt that." He held her close and led her slowly across the deck. Never mind that they were outside. The magic of the moment made him feel drunk with joy. Was this really happening? They were dancing under the stars and Mary Catherine wasn't fighting him?

"You, on the other hand . . ." She tilted her face to his. "You're quite the dancer."

"Took it for a year in college." He laughed. "Coach thought it would give the pitchers better balance."

"Did it?"

He looked at the sky and then back at her. "It gave me this."

“Well then.” She didn’t look away. “I guess it was worth it.”

The song was ending, and Marcus could barely breathe. They were back at the railing and he slowed their movement, stopped their swaying. “Mary Catherine.” He swallowed. He didn’t know what to say. He only wanted this feeling to last forever.

She put her head on his chest again. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” He gently lifted her chin so she would look at him. “Don’t be sorry.”

Her eyes told him whatever was happening between them, she was feeling it, too. “I can’t . . . I’m not . . .”

“Shhh.” He took her face in his hands. It was too late to stop, too late to do anything but kiss her. The way he had wanted to kiss her since their walk that night. Slowly he brought his face to hers. Their lips touched and the feeling was light and passion and desperation, all at the same time.

She didn’t fight him, didn’t try to pull away. Instead she returned his kiss, working her hand up his neck to the back of his head. Marcus was consumed by her, taken by her in a way that affected his entire being. She moved him, body and soul. He drew back, checking her eyes. “You okay?”

“I need to go.” Her lips were still parted, her breathing faster than before. “Marcus . . . I want this.” She hung her head and when she looked up the sadness in her eyes was greater than the heat a few seconds ago. “I can’t. I’m sorry.” She leaned up and kissed him again, slowly, deliberately. But it was a goodbye kiss.

Marcus could feel the difference.

She stepped back. “Take me home. Please.”

He shouldn’t have kissed her. Marcus reached for her hand. “I’m sorry. I should’ve waited.”

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s not you. It’s me. I can’t . . . explain it.” She allowed him to hold her hand as they walked in and got her things.

On the drive, disappointment greater than the breadth of the sky washed over him. What was wrong with her? When they reached her apartment, Marcus killed the engine and turned to her. “Is it me? You’re not attracted to me?”

A single laugh escaped her and she let her head fall back. “Are you serious?” She looked at him, her cheeks slightly redder than before. “I can’t even think around you.” She took his hand and looked deep into his eyes. “You make me feel . . . like I’ve never felt.”

“So . . .” Hope shot through Marcus. “Maybe we need to take things slower. Stay with Tyler and Sami so”—he laughed—“you know, we don’t wind up dancing under the stars.”

The laughter left her and she looked at her hands for a long few seconds.

“It’s not that.” She angled her face and turned her eyes to him once more. “Please, Marcus. Trust me.”

He wanted to argue, but there wasn’t room. She had left him no choice. He climbed out, helped her from her side of the car, and walked with her up to the door. When he hugged her, she let herself linger. But she eased back before either of them might think about another kiss. “Thank you.” She smiled, her eyes as sincere as summer. “I had the best night ever.”

“Me, too.” He wanted to stop time and make her explain things. How could she slip into her apartment without helping him understand? If they both felt this, then how come . . . ?

Her smile was marked with longing. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

He waited until she shut the door before turning around and heading back to his car. In all his life he’d never felt like this. The way she made him feel. And since she was as drawn to him as he was to her, he had no idea what the problem was or why she wouldn’t tell him. He knew only one thing.

He wouldn’t give up until she did.

Hoofstuk 26

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M

arcus was nie seker wat om te verwag van die eerste groepbyeenkoms saam met die meisies nie, maar sekerlik nie wat hy wel daar vind nie. Hulle ontmoet Dinsdagaand om sesuur in ’n vertrek by die polisiestasie, volgens die voorskrifte. Tyler en Sami sit by Alicia, die klein blonde meisie, en Marcus en Mary Catherine sit by Lexy.

Net hulle ses.

Die onderwerp wat die meisies wil bespreek, maak Marcus dankbaar dat hulle eers opgelei is hiervoor. Die meisies lyk jonk, te jonk om in die moeilikheid te wees. Maar hulle is wys bo hul jare. Vandag se gesprek gaan oor die verskil tussen liefde en mishandeling.

Aangesien hulle God in die gesprek kan inbring as die meisies gewillig is – en hulle is – begin Marcus die byeenkoms met die Here se definisie van liefde. Hy lees dit uit 1 Korintiërs 13 in sy Bybel.

‘Die liefde is geduldig, die liefde is vriendelik; dit is nie afgunstig nie,’ Marcus kyk na die twee meisies. Hulle lyk terneergedruk. Dis asof hulle nie

luister nie. Hy hou aan lees: ‘... is nie grootpraterig nie, is nie verwaand nie. Dit handel nie onweloweglik nie, soek nie sy eie belang nie, is nie liggeraak nie, hou nie boek van die kwaad nie.’

Lexy is die eerste een wat haar oë opslaan. Marcus bly stil en wag dat sy iets sê. Uiteindelik gooi sy haar hande in die lug. ‘Goed dan.’ Haar stem is vol seer. ‘Jy sê liefde is nie grootpraterig en verwaand nie? Dis hoe Dwayne is.’ Sy kyk na Alicia. ‘Dis hoe ouens is, dan nie?’

‘Ja, definitief.’ Die meisie se vingers is ineengestremel. Dis duidelik dat sy ongemaklik voel. ‘Hulle is altyd kwaad oor iets.’

Hulle praat vir ’n halfuur oor hoe die meisies liefde ervaar, en dat die liefde wat hulle ken, die teenoorgestelde is van die liefde wat in Korintiërs beskryf word. Lexy vertel dat Dwayne gedreig het om haar dood te maak.

‘Sien jy, Lexy.’ Mary Catherine se stem is vriendelik. ‘Dis presies waarom ons vandag praat. Dwayne maak jou emosioneel en fisiek seer. Dis nie liefde nie.’

Marcus hou daarvan om na Mary Catherine te kyk as sy met die meisies werk. Dit is asof sy hiervoor gemaak is. Sy kyk verby Lexy se harde dop en spreek direk tot haar hart. Noudat die byeenkoms ten einde loop, maak die meisies ’n bietjie oop.

Lexy gesels oor die ouens wat sy voor Dwayne gehad het, en Alicia vertel van haar huidige kêrel. Alhoewel Alicia se misdaad diefstal was, was haar verhoudings klaarblyklik nie goed vir haar nie. Marcus se hart is seer vir die meisies se onthalwe. Dit sal meer as ’n uur en ’n half neem om hulle te leer dat mishandeling nie dieselfde as liefde is nie.

Maar hulle het baie verder gevorder as wat Marcus verwag het.

Hy dink aan offisier Kent se woorde daardie eerste dag. Die kinders is honger vir iemand wat bereid is om in hulle te belê, iemand wat genoeg omgee om te luister en leiding te gee. Ja, hulle het aanvanklik torings om hulle gebou. Hulle sal dit moontlik by elke byeenkoms doen. Maar uiteindelik sal hulle begin gesels. En dan is daar net twee reëls vir die vrywilligers.

Luister. En moenie geskok lyk nie.

Wat moeilik is, dit moet Marcus erken. Waar is die mense wat veronderstel was om hierdie meisies te versorg en te beskerm? Omdat hulle nooit behoorlike toesig gehad het nie, of omdat hulle swak rolmodelle gehad het, is hul lewe amper geprogrammeer vir geweld en mishandeling, misdaad en tronkstraf.

Maar vandag se byeenkoms wys dat daar tog hoop is. Die meisies het begin praat, en hulle kon na hulle luister. Dit is meer as wat hulle verwag het.

Na die byeenkoms neem hulle die meisies na die Dairy Queen. ’n Deel van die program is om normale kuiertydjies in te bou waar die meisies net gewone

meisies kan wees. Marcus verwonder hom aan hoe maklik hulle almal saamlag en kuier. 'n Ander omgewing verander dadelik die groepdinamika. Net toe hulle uitmekaar wil gaan, lui Mary Catherine se selfoon. Sy antwoord en haar hele gesig begin straal. 'Dis wonderlike nuus!' Sy sit haar hand op haar mond en skud haar kop. 'Shamika, ek is so bly! Ja, ek sal vir hulle sê.' Haar oë blink van die trane, maar haar gesig is een groot glimlag. 'n Wonderwerk, dis seker!'

Toe sy die oproep beëindig, hou sy haar hande uit na die ander. Almal staan nader, en Lexy en haar nuwe vriendin lyk ook geïnteresseerd. 'Wat het gebeur?' Lexy is die eerste een wat vra.

'Dis Jalen. Hy het wakker geword. Hy praat met sy ma!'

'Dis wonderlik!' Marcus is eerste daar, en toe kom Tyler en Sami ook. Hulle maak 'n kring, hul arms om mekaar.

'Dis wonderlik.' Sami se oë is ook vol trane. 'Dis die beste nuus nog.'

Marcus voel hoe sy knieë bewe. 'Hy was nie veronderstel om te lewe nie.'

'Ek weet.' Mary Catherine se oë blink van vreugde. 'En hulle dink daar is geen breinskade nie!'

'Wow ... dankie, Here!' Marcus fluister die woorde. Hy is bly dat hulle die goeie nuus saam kon kry. Boonop is sy Twitter-volgeling steeds besig om die nuus te versprei, steeds besig om mense op te roep om te bid.

'Kan ons na hom toe gaan?' Sami klink hoopvol. 'Ek wil hom graag sien.'

'Kom ons wag tot môre. Shamika sê die dokters is besig met toetse.' Mary Catherine maak die kringetjie oop, haar oë op Lexy en Alicia, wat 'n bietjie ongemaklik eenkant toe gaan staan het.

'Ons kan almal saam gaan.' Tyler klink opgewonde. 'Ek het al baie dinge gesien wat God gedoen het, maar hierdie een vat die koek.'

Marcus sit sy arm om Mary Catherine se skouers. Hulle is nou al meer gemaklik in mekaar se geselskap. Hulle het die afgelope tyd deur diep waters gegaan, en hy wil daar wees vir haar, beskikbaar by die hoogte- sowel as die laagtepunte.

En hier is een van die beste hoogtepunte van almal.

Toe sien hy vir Lexy. Haar hande is voor haar gesig, en haar rug is na hulle toe. Sy loop stadig weg, asof sy in 'n trans is, en gaan sit by 'n ander tafel. Haar gesig is nog in haar hande, en haar lyf begin ruk.

'Wat is dit?' Marcus kyk na Mary Catherine.

Haar oë is vol begrip toe sy na die meisie kyk. 'Ek dink ek weet.' Sy wys hy moet saamkom. 'Kom ons gaan gesels met haar.'

Tyler en Sami bly by Alicia, en Marcus en Mary Catherine stap na Lexy toe. Mary Catherine gaan sit langs haar en sit haar hand op haar rug. 'Wat is fout, jong?'

Lexy snik. Marcus besef skielik watter groot verandering die meisie moet verwerk. Sy was hard en ongenaakbaar toe Mary Catherine haar leer ken het. Maar tydens en na die tronktoer kon sy nie haar gevoelens wegsteek nie. Hulle oorweldig haar ook nou. Baie moet nog gebeur voordat hierdie program werklik 'n verskil in haar lewe gaan maak. Maar hierdie tye, waar sy haar emosies op die tafel sit, is vir hulle 'n wonderlike antwoord op hul gebede.

Na 'n rukkie lig sy haar kop op. Haar oë is rooi, haar gesig nat. 'Niks.'

Marcus voel verward. 'Niks is verkeerd nie?'

'Nee.' Sy snuif, en wil-wil weer begin huil. 'Ek het gesê as God werklik is, moet Hy ... daardie seuntjie ... gesond maak.' Sy skud haar kop. 'Ek het nie gedink Hy kan dit doen nie.' Sy sit een hand voor haar gesig. 'So Hy moet werklik wees.' Sy kyk weer na hulle. 'God moet werklik wees.'

Marcus se oë brand toe hy na haar kyk. Mary Catherine skuif nader en sit haar arm om die meisie. 'Dis reg. Hy is werklik. En Hy is lief vir jou, Lexy. Meer as wat jy kan begryp.'

'Ek het gedink ek sal iets vra wat regtig moeilik is.' Sy vee haar wange met al twee hande af. 'Iets wat net God kan doen. As Hy bestaan.' Sy huil nog. 'Maar ... as Hy daar is, hoe kan Hy vir my lief wees na ... na al die dinge wat ek gedoen het?'

Daar lê 'n lang pad voor. Marcus haal diep asem. 'Lexy, ons het almal dinge gedoen wat ons nie moes gedoen het nie. God wil net hê ons moet jammer voel daaroor en dit vir Hom sê. En dan kan ons oor begin. Hy gee vir ons 'n nuwe lewe.'

'Vir my ook?' Daar is weer 'n harde kyk in haar oë. 'Daar waar ek woon? Dit sal meer vat, daar waar ek vandaan kom.'

'Miskien is daar tog 'n manier.' Marcus weier om moedeloos te voel. 'Daar is altyd 'n ander manier vir God.'

Lexy dink daaroor na en knik toe stadig. 'n Glimlag lig haar mondhoeke en sy draai na Mary Catherine. 'Wanneer julle môre na die seun toe gaan ... kan ek saamgaan?'

Mary Catherine kyk vinnig na Marcus. Miskien mag Lexy nie na die hospitaal toe gaan nie. Sy was immers in die motor toe Dwayne die skoot afgevuur het. Mary Catherine staan nader aan Lexy en kyk in haar oë. 'Ek sal kyk wat ek kan doen.'

'Ek weet ... jy dink seker die ma wil my nie daar hê nie.' Sy snuif. 'Ek wil eintlik net vir hulle sê ek is jammer.'

'Goed dan.' Mary Catherine se stem is sag en vriendelik. 'Ek sal met hulle praat. Ek is seker hulle sal bly wees dat jy jammer is. En dat jy gebid het.'

Lexy knik weer. 'Ek moet huis toe gaan. Ek het vir my ouma gesê ek sal nie laat wees nie.'

Tyler, Sami en Alicia staan nader en groet. 'Ek moet môre gaan werk.' Sami trek 'n gesig. 'Ek dink daaraan om te bedank, en 'n werk te soek wat regtig saak maak.' Sy en Tyler glimlag vir mekaar. 'Ons sal sien. Dis alles Mary Catherine se skuld!'

Marcus en Mary Catherine neem vir Lexy huis toe, en toe hulle weer alleen in die motor is, voel Marcus hoe sy hart bly word. 'Het jy tyd vir aandete? Ons kan iets kry en by my huis gaan eet, as jy wil.'

Dit lyk asof Mary Catherine gaan weier, asof sy 'n rede gaan vind waarom hulle nie 'n paar uur saam kan kuier nie. Maar toe vind sy haar beste tergende glimlag. 'Ek sou kon kosmaak.'

'Organies, geen suiker nie, geen brood nie.' Marcus lag. 'Of ... ons kan pizza kry?'

Mary Catherine druk haar skouer teen die sitplek. 'Nee, ek is ernstig. Ek sal vir jou hoender met amandels maak. Dis beter as pizza, ek belowe.'

'Wel, dit klink wonderlik.'

Hulle gaan soek die bestanddele by 'n gesondheidswinkel uit en werk saam aan die aandete in Marcus se kombuis. 'Jy kan die assistent-sjef wees. Hoe klink dit?'

'Klink vir my na 'n bra nederig werkie.' Hy was sy hande. 'Maar as ek een moet wees om hierdie ete klaar te kry, sal ek dit maar doen, wat!' Sy rekenaar staan op 'n lessenaar langs die toonbank en hy gaan soek vir hulle musiek uit. Mary Catherine lag net vir hom. 'Dink net.' Sy glimlag en gee hom 'n ui en 'n soetrissie. 'Jy gaan dalk 'n passie ontwikkel vir organiese kos. Soos ek. Hierdie aand kan jou lewe verander!'

Sy draai om na die wasbak toe, en Marcus staan net daar en kyk na haar.

Hy het nog nooit iemand soos sy ontmoet nie. Sy gee glad nie om wat mense van haar dink nie, maar gryp net elke dag die lewe asof dit haar laaste dag kan wees. Hy glimlag. Ja, hy kan 'n passie ontwikkel, en die aand kan sy lewe verander. Maar as dit gebeur, sal dit niks met kos te doen hê nie.

Die hoender is in 'n bak en Mary Catherine is besig om dit in stukke te sny. Sy kyk oor haar skouer. 'Hei, jy is veronderstel om daardie goed fyn te kerf.' 'Fyn te kerf.' Hy gaan haal 'n mes en snyplank. 'Ek kan sny. Maar jy sal fynkerf moet demonstreer. Jy het mos so gesê?'

Sy was haar hande en droog hulle af. 'Goed.' Sy kom na hom toe, en haar oë blink. Dis donker, en hulle is alleen in die huis. 'Staan opsy!'

Hy doen dit, maar nie te ver weg nie. Die reuk van haar parfuum oorweldig sy sintuie en hy wens hulle is meer as vriende wat 'n maaltyd saam voorberei. Sy is ernstig oor haar taak om hom te onderrig.

'Fynkerf is kleiner stukkies.' Sy sny 'n skyfie van die ui af en met 'n reeks klein kerfbeweginkies tower sy dit om in 'n klomp klein stukkies.

‘Dit lyk na baie werk.’ Marcus lag. ‘Is jy seker ons kan dit nie net sny nie?’
‘Dis nie moeilik nie. Probeer net.’ Sy gee hom die mes. ‘Komaan, jy kan as jy wil.’

Hy is ten volle bewus van haar teenwoordigheid, hul arms wat aan mekaar raak, haar hande se bewegings. Hy neem die mes en probeer die ui kerf. Dit gaan stadig, maar hy kry dit darem reg.

‘Perfek!’ Sy leun oor en skuif die hopie gekerfde uie een kant toe. ‘Het jy dit?’

Hy wil haar in sy arms neem en dwarsdeur die kombuis met haar dans, hy wil van die uie en van alles om hulle vergeet. Behalwe van haar. Maar hy maak ’n klein buiginkie. ‘Ek is bly u is tevrede, skone dame!’

Sy lag. ‘Is jy seker jy is nie in die suide grootgemaak nie?’

‘Ek wens ek was.’ Hy kyk in haar oë. ‘Dan het ek jou dalk vroeër leer ken.’

Dit lyk asof sy woorde haar diep raak. Haar lag word sagter en sy glimlag vir hom. ‘Ek sou daarvan gehou het.’

‘Ek ook.’ Hy kyk na die uie. ‘Wel, ons het kos om te maak.’

Toe dit by die hoender kom, maak Mary Catherine ’n mengsel van fyn amandels en ander speserye. Sy druk elke stuk hoender in ’n bakkie amandelmelk en daarna in die amandels en speserye. Daarna braai sy die hoenderstukke in klapperolie.

‘Hmm, mag ek net sê ...’ Marcus geniet die kosgeure wat in die kombuis hang. ‘Jy kan maar enige tyd in my kombuis kom kosmaak.’

‘Ek het gesê dit sal jou lewe verander.’ Sy hou aan terg. Seker omdat dit veilig is – sy is mos vasbeslote dat hulle nie méér as vriende sal wees nie.

Marcus gee nie om nie. Hy wil by haar wees. En hy geniet die tergery. Hy braai die fyngekerfde groente saam met murgpampoentjies en hulle gaan eet op sy balkon. Die nag is warm: Dis nog ten minste vier en twintig grade.

‘Dis pragtig hier buite.’ Mary Catherine kyk oor Silver Lake uit. ‘Sami het my vertel van jou mooi uitsig.’

‘Jy sal meer dikwels moet kom kuier.’ Die maaltyd is perfek. Maar dit is niks teen hoe dit voel om hier langs haar te sit, hier waar daar nie opleiding en tronkbesoeke of jeugsentrumprobleme is nie. Dit herinner hom aan hul eerste wandeling, voor die skietery.

‘Jy sê die Waynes woon hier naby?’ Mary Catherine glimlag vir hom. ‘Geen wonder julle is goeie vriende nie.’

‘Rhonda hou van jou. Sy wil jou graag beter leer ken.’

‘Ja, dit sal lekker wees.’

‘Tussen hakies.’ Marcus hou sy amandelhoender in die lug. ‘Ek is oortuig. Organiese kosmaak het my lewe verander. Beslis.’ Hy lag. ‘Ek het regtig nie geweet dit kan so lekker wees nie.’

‘Kos soos die Here dit gemaak het, is altyd lekkerder. Dit was een van die dinge wat ek moes leer.’

‘Eet jy nooit suiker of brood nie? Regtig nie?’

Mary Catherine lag. ‘Jy laat dit soos ’n sware straf klink.’

‘Ek dink ek kan my dit net nie indink nie.’ Hy byt ’n stukkie van die hoender af. ‘Wil jy werklik vir my sê vroeër vanmiddag wou jy regtig nie roomys eet nie?’

‘Wel, dit smaak lekker. Maar ek wou dit nie hê nie.’ Sy lig haar wenkbroue. ‘Suiker veroorsaak siektes. Diabetes. Demensie.’ Sy gee hom ’n lawwe kyk. ‘En ja, ek eet soms pizza. Ek is nie perfek nie!’

Hy staar haar aan, bestudeer haar. Memoriseer haar wangbene en vonkelende oë. ‘Amper, hoor!’

Sy glimlag. ‘Jy is heeltemal te gaaf.’

‘Net eerlik.’

Hulle kuier vrolik en gemaklik saam tydens die ete. Marcus kan voel hoe hy al hoe meer tot haar aangetrokke voel, maar hy gee nie om nie. Hy is betower. Toe hulle die borde na ete indra, kyk Mary Catherine om na hom. ‘Wanneer kom Tyler terug?’

‘Ek dink hy en Sami het gaan fliek.’ Hy haal sy selfoon uit om te kyk hoe laat dit is. ‘Hy sal seker eers oor ten minste ’n uur opdaag.’

Mary Catherine knik. Hulle was saam die skottelgoed, en Marcus probeer aan ’n manier dink om haar langer te laat bly. Dit is net na nege. ‘Jy werk nie môre nie, of hoe?’ Hy kyk hoopvol na haar.

‘Nee. Die ateljee is elke tweede Woensdag gesluit.’ Sy droog haar hande af.

‘Kan jy langer bly? Net ’n rukkie?’

‘Wel ...’ Dit is asof sy op twee gedagtes hink. Maar toe glimlag sy en steek haar hande in haar jeans se sakke. ‘Ek sien jy het ’n snoekertafel.’

Sy hou nooit op om hom te verras nie. ‘Kan jy speel?’

‘Speel?’ Sy lig haar ken. ‘Ek het dit oorweeg om professioneel te speel. Maar toe besluit dit sal my lewe insluk.’

Daar is beslis ’n vonk tussen hulle: Die lug is elektries. Marcus is bly oor die afleiding van ’n snoekerspel. ‘Nou toe, kom ons pak die balle uit.’

Toe hulle ’n ent weg gespeel het, begin Marcus lag. ‘Ek het gedink jy maak ’n grap. Oor professioneel speel.’

‘Glad nie.’ Sy kyk hom onskuldig aan. ‘Ek terg nooit nie, Marcus. Nooit nie.’

‘Sekerlik nie oor snoeker nie, dis seker.’ Sy loop met drie balle voor. ‘Jy sal ’n fortuin kan maak hiermee. Hoe het jy geleer?’

‘Saam met my pa gespeel.’ Mary Catherine hou haar stok regop langs haar en glimlag. ‘Dis die ding wat ons twee saam gedoen het.’

Marcus skud sy kop. ‘Hy het jou baie, baie goed geleer.’

Hulle speel twee keer, en sy wen elke keer. 'Ek wou sê ons moet kyk wie is die beste uit vyf, maar soos dit nou aangaan, gaan dit die beste uit sewe word.' Haar lag vermeng met die klaviermusiek wat deur die huis swewe. 'Miskien moet ons iets minder kompetend speel.'

'Ek het 'n backgammon-bord.' Hy wys na die rak in die woonkamer. 'Niemand kom naby my in backgammon nie.'

'Volgende keer.' Sy glimlag. 'Ek moet huis toe gaan.'

'Dis nog vroeg.' Hy kyk nie weg nie. 'Kom ons gaan 'n bietjie uit. Die sterre is waarskynlik perfek.' Hy neem haar hand, maar huiwer tog 'n bietjie. Hy kan nie sy aangetrokkenheid tot haar keer nie. Maar sy het haar saak baie duidelik op die strand gestel. Hy sal nie aandrang op meer nie.

'Kom.' Hy neem haar buitentoe en hulle gaan staan by die reling en kyk uit oor die meer.

'Jy was reg.' Sy kyk op. 'Die sterre is manjifiek.'

'Ek kom nie dikwels genoeg hierheen nie. Op 'n aand soos vanaand is dit asof die Skepper baie naby is.'

'Mmmm. Ek hou daarvan dat jy dit sê.' Sy sit haar kop op sy skouer. 'Jy is reg. Ek kan Hom hier by ons voel.'

Marcus is besig om die stryd te verloor. Waarom sit sy haar kop op sy skouer as sy net vriende wil wees? Hy sit sy arm om haar middel en hulle bly so staan, met die musiek oral om hulle.

Mary Catherine se selfoon maak 'n gongsgeluid. 'Ekskuus.' Sy haal dit uit haar sak. 'Ek sal dit afsit.'

Maar voordat sy dit doen, kyk sy na die boodskap. 'Dis van Shamika.' Mary Catherine verstel die ligintensiteit sodat sy dit kan lees. 'Sy sê dit gaan ál beter met Jalen.' Sy trek haar asem in. 'Die dokters dink hy sal ten volle herstel.' Sy stuur gou 'n SMS terug: 'Wonderlik!' Toe sit sy die selfoon af en sit dit in haar sak.

En toe, asof dit die natuurlikste ding in die wêreld is, sit sy haar arms om sy nek en gee hom 'n drukkie. 'Ek kan dit nie glo nie. Net die Here kan so iets doen.' Sy lag, deels van verrassing, deels van vreugde.

Marcus sit sy arms om haar middel. 'Ek het gewonder hoe ek sal kan aangaan. By die jeugsentrum.' Hy praat naby haar gesig. 'As Jalen nooit wakker geword het nie.'

Die drukkie was bedoel as viering van die goeie nuus. Van een van die beste hoogtepunte van almal wat hulle die afgelope week gedeel het. Behalwe dat nie een van hulle weer wil laat los nie. Sy laat weer haar kop op sy skouer rus. Die musiek is 'n instrumentale nommer van Chicago.

Hy leun effens terug en soek in haar oë. 'Sal ons dans?'

'Ek is nie baie goed daarmee nie.' Haar stem is net 'n fluistering toe hulle op

maat van die musiek begin wieg.

‘Ek twyfel.’ Hy hou haar naby hom en lei haar stadig oor die balkon. Dit maak nie saak dat hulle buite is nie. Die betowering van die oomblik laat hom dronk van vreugde voel. Is dit regtig besig om te gebeur? Hulle twee dans saam onder die sterre en Mary Catherine doen gewillig mee?

‘Jy, aan die ander kant,’ sê sy en kyk op na hom, ‘is baie goed hiermee.’

‘Vir ’n jaar lank les geneem toe ek op universiteit was.’ Hy lag. ‘Ons afrigter het gedink dit sal die gooiers se balans verbeter.’

‘En het dit?’

Hy kyk op na die sterre en toe weer na haar. ‘Dit het my ’n beter danser gemaak.’

Sy kyk nie weg nie. ‘Wel, dan dink ek dit was die moeite werd.’

Die lied is klaar en Marcus kan skaars asemhaal. Hulle is terug by die reling en hy gaan staan stil. ‘Mary Catherine.’ Hy sluk. Hy weet nie wat om te sê nie. Hy wil net hê die gevoel moet vir altyd aangaan.

Sy sit weer haar kop teen sy bors. ‘Ek is jammer.’

‘Nee.’ Hy lig haar ken saggies sodat sy na hom moet kyk. ‘Moenie jammer wees nie.’

Haar oë sê vir hom dat sy bewus is van wat tussen hulle gebeur. ‘Ek kan nie ... ek is nie ...’

‘Shh.’ Hy neem haar gesig in sy hande. Dit is nou te laat om om te draai, te laat om enige iets anders te doen as om haar te soen. Soos hy haar wou soen sedert hul wandeling daardie aand. Hy bring sy gesig stadig na hare. Hul lippe raak en die gevoel is lig en passievol en desperaat, alles tegelyk.

Sy weerstaan hom nie, probeer nie wegbeur nie. Sy soen hom terug, beweeg haar hand van sy nek na sy agterkop. Sy oorweldig hom, op ’n manier wat sy hele wese in besit neem. Sy ontroer hom, liggaam en siel. Hy trek terug en kyk in haar oë. ‘Alles reg?’

‘Ek moet gaan.’ Haar lippe is oop, haar asemhaling vinniger as gewoonlik.

‘Marcus ... dit is waarna ek smag.’ Sy laat haar kop sak en toe sy weer opkyk na hom is dit met ’n hartseer in haar oë wat groter is as die hitte van die vorige oomblik. ‘Ek kan nie. Ek is jammer.’ Sy leun nader en soen hom, stadig en doelbewus. Maar dit is ’n afskeidsoen.

Marcus kan die verskil voel.

Sy tree terug. ‘Neem my huis toe. Asseblief.’

Hy moes haar nie gesoen het nie. Marcus neem haar hand. ‘Ek is jammer. Ek moes nog gewag het.’

‘Nee.’ Sy skud haar kop. ‘Dis nie jy nie. Dis ek. Ek kan nie ... ek kan nie verduidelik nie.’ Sy laat toe dat hy haar hand vashou toe hulle ingaan en haar goed gaan haal.

Op pad terug daal 'n teleurstelling so breed soos die uitpansel oor hom. Wat is fout met haar? By haar woonstel hou Marcus stil en draai na haar toe. 'Is dit ek? Hou jy nie van my nie?'

Sy gee 'n kort laggie en kyk op na hom. 'Is jy ernstig?' Haar wange is rooier as vantevore. 'As ek by jou is, kan ek skaars dink.' Sy neem sy hand en kyk in sy oë. 'Jy laat my iets voel ... wat ek nog nooit ervaar het nie.'

'Maar dan ...' Die hoop skiet op in Marcus. 'Miskien moet ons dinge net stadiger vat. Saam met Sami en Tyler uitgaan sodat' – hy lag – 'ons nie onder die sterre opeindig en begin dans nie.'

Haar lag is skielik weg. Sy sit vir 'n lang ruk na haar hande en kyk. 'Dis nie wat dit is nie.' Sy kyk weer op na hom. 'Asseblief, Marcus. Glo my.'

Hy wil nog verder daaroor praat, haar oortuig, maar hy kan nie. Sy laat hom geen keuse nie. Hy klim uit, help haar uit en stap saam met haar na die deur toe. Toe hy haar vashou, laat sy haarself toe om in sy omhelsing te bly staan. Maar sy maak haar los voordat hulle weer aan 'n soen kan begin dink. 'Dankie.' Sy glimlag, haar oë opreg soos somer. 'Dit was die beste aand van my lewe.'

'Vir my ook.' Hy wil hê die tyd moet stilstaan; hy wil haar dwing om te verduidelik. Hoe kan sy net verdwyn sonder om hom te laat verstaan? As hulle dit al twee voel, hoekom ...?

Haar glimlag is vol verlange. 'Sien jou.'

'Sien jou.'

Hy wag tot sy die deur toemaak voordat hy omdraai en na sy motor stap. Hy het nog nooit in sy hele lewe so gevoel nie. Soos sy hom laat voel nie. En aangesien sy net so aangetrokke tot hom is soos hy tot haar, kan hy nie verstaan wat die probleem is, of waarom sy hom nie daarvan kan vertel nie. Hy weet egter een ding.

Hy sal nie tou opgooi tot sy dit doen nie.

27



EXCEPT FOR THEIR GROUP meetings at the police station on Thursday and a hangout with Tyler and Sami Saturday night, Mary Catherine did a good job of avoiding Marcus the rest of the week.

She had no choice.

Her doctor appointment was that Monday morning and as she signed in at the office, she knew her hurting heart had nothing to do with her health. The night at Marcus's house had been the best. Mary Catherine had told him the truth.

The pull Marcus Dillinger had on her was beyond anything she had ever experienced. She had replayed that night a thousand times and always she was sure. There was nothing she would've done differently. He made her laugh and feel, and in his presence all of life was good and right and whole.

By the time they stepped out on the deck after the pool games, Mary Catherine didn't care about her damaged heart or the time she didn't have. She had that night. It was all she could think about.

The nurse stepped out and called her name. "The doctor will see you first. We'll do paperwork and blood tests later. Before you leave."

"Yes, ma'am." She followed the woman to a familiar room, changed into a hospital gown, and waited.

A few minutes later Dr. Cohen stepped inside.

"Mary Catherine." He shook her hand. His face was masked in shadows. "I'm sorry about all this." He raised his brow and gave a single shake of his head. "It took me by surprise." He pulled up a chair and sat down, facing her. "A heart transplant is always a possibility for anyone with your condition. But I really thought you'd only need a valve."

The Internet had given Mary Catherine ample time to research. "I wrote down a few questions." She pulled her phone from her purse. "Is that okay?"

"Of course." He crossed his arms, waiting.

She opened her notes app and started at the top. " 'Why not a valve transplant first? It wouldn't be as invasive, and it could buy us more time.' " She looked at Dr. Cohen. "Right?"

"Well . . ." He angled his head one way and then the other, as if he were weighing the possibility. "I had a patient last year. Tried to replace his aortic valve and his ascending aorta—exactly the surgery you would need in that scenario." He gave a sad shake of his head. "Young guy. Just twenty years old. Suffered a heart attack during the procedure, which created more damage. He had to be resuscitated nine times before we finished operating."

The doctor explained that the surgery did such damage to the young man's heart, he was suddenly rushed to the top of the transplant list. "Thankfully, he got his heart. He's doing well."

Mary Catherine hung onto those last few words. "A person with a heart transplant can do well?"

"Yes." Caution sounded in his tone. "There are nearly two hundred

thousand patients waiting for a heart. Conditions have to be just right.”

“But if . . .”

“It’s a long road, but yes. We know of heart transplant patients who are still alive twenty, twenty-five years after surgery. It’s rare but possible.”

Possible.

For the first time since the call from the doctor’s office a week ago, Mary Catherine didn’t feel like she was falling. The blackness that sucked her hope and light and energy cracked and she could see blue sky again. “I . . . guess I didn’t know that.”

“It doesn’t always work that way. If a patient gets a heart . . .” His brow raised again. “*If* . . . well, then, sometimes the patient is sickly for the next few years and then we lose them. Their bodies can reject the organ or vice versa. Lots can go wrong.”

“Dr. Cohen.” Mary Catherine smiled. “You should know me better than that. I’m not a lots-can-go-wrong kind of girl. I believe in the most rare possibilities.” They’d been over this before. “Remember?”

“Yes.” The doctor smiled, patient. “Because that’s where God works best.”

“Exactly.” She tried not to think about Marcus. “I had made a plan not to fall in love. Given the situation.” Her smile took some effort. “But from what you just told me, there’s still hope.”

“For love?” The doctor had a fond way of looking at her. As if she were his daughter.

“For life. To really live.”

“Your situation is complicated, Mary Catherine. I don’t want to give you false hope.”

“Hope can never be false. It’s the product of faith, the substance of things not seen.” She exhaled and tried to settle down. “I didn’t know heart transplant people could live that long. That’s all.”

“I’m afraid I have more, Mary Catherine.”

She blinked and sank a little into the examination table. “Okay.”

Dr. Cohen opened a notebook and went over her tests in detail. Her situation was much worse than he had expected. Worse than Mary Catherine had known.

“You’ll start feeling symptoms soon. Tiredness, shortness of breath.” He peered at her, sterner than before. “You need to curb the things that give you an adrenaline rush. I know that’ll be hard.”

Mary Catherine stared at the man and then let her gaze fall to a spot on the floor. “Adrenaline rush?” She muttered the words and then looked at him again. Her whole life was an adrenaline rush. “Like . . . skydiving?”

“That, obviously. But boogie boarding . . . sprinting . . . competitive

games. Anything that makes your heart work too hard.”

The darkness was back. “You’re asking me to quit living?”

“No.” He sighed and closed the notebook. “Mary Catherine, I’m asking you to take it easy. Be serious about this. Until we can find you a heart.”

She nodded, but inside she was falling . . . falling the same as before. “And you think it’ll be at least six months before I’ll be on the list?”

“Yes.” He frowned. “I’m so sorry. You’ll need to talk once a week with a counselor about what’s too much activity now and what’s appropriate health and wellness care as you near your time on the list. We have a myriad of blood tests for you today and . . .”

Mary Catherine couldn’t hear him. He was still talking, still telling her all that was required of her and how her life would change while she waited to be placed on the list. Something about the time being sped up if her next series of heart tests in a few months were significantly worse than they were now. All Mary Catherine could think about was adrenaline, and the fact that it had been hurting her heart.

The very thing that made her feel alive was taking years off her life.

Dr. Cohen was explaining something else, something about how though she wasn’t quite sick enough to be on the list, she was getting there quickly. But Mary Catherine was picturing the children on her refrigerator, the ones she sponsored. What if she didn’t get a transplant? Or what if she got one and it didn’t take? She would never have another time like now to go to Africa, to live there and move among the people and love them the way she had always dreamed.

She couldn’t have Marcus, that much was certain.

At least she could have this. “Dr. Cohen.” She must’ve interrupted him because he looked like he was caught midsentence. “I’m sorry. I have to tell you something.”

“I understand this is difficult.” His patience remained. “What is it?”

“I’m moving to Africa. In a month.” She couldn’t pose the idea as a question. He’d never let her go. “I’ll be living in Uganda for six months.” She was aware she sounded a bit intense. She softened her tone some. “I . . . thought you should know.”

“Mary Catherine, you can’t move to Uganda. Not when we’re trying to get you on the transplant list.”

“You’re doing the tests today, right? Any additional tests can be done there. They have a hospital. We can have the results sent to you.”

Dr. Cohen looked caught off guard. “That would be . . . well, it would be highly unconventional. You’d have to return at a moment’s notice. The minute we could get you officially on the transplant list.”

“I understand.” A surge of elation rushed through her. Her damaged heart had cost her so much, but it wouldn’t cost her this. She would leave California as soon as possible. Spend a week with each of her parents and then fly to Uganda. She was connected with a ministry there, and they were always looking for volunteers. If she had it her way, she would spend the next six months building a new orphanage. Something that would serve the people for decades.

Even if she couldn’t.

“I have to tell you, Mary Catherine, I completely recommend against a move to Uganda. With your heart this way.”

“I have no symptoms. I feel wonderful.” She thought about dancing with Marcus the other night. “Better than wonderful. If I’m going to move to Uganda I should do it now. Before I start to feel . . . whatever you said.”

Again he looked stumped. “How quickly can a person get home from Uganda? That’s what I want you to find out. You’d need a couple days’ travel at least.” He removed his glasses and massaged his brow. “I’m not sure that would get you here quickly enough.”

“I won’t wait that long. If I start to feel sick, I’ll come home.”

“You understand that this goes against the advice on adrenaline?” Dr. Cohen set his notebook on the counter beside him. “I ask you to keep things calm, and you tell me you’re moving to Uganda.”

“It’s a calm place, Dr. Cohen. Really.” She grinned. “No amusement parks, no skydiving. Very simple.”

“Let’s get through your blood tests and paperwork.” He stood and pulled his stethoscope to his ears. “Let me take a listen.” He moved around behind her and pressed the base to her back. “Breathe.”

Mary Catherine filled her lungs.

“Again.”

She did as he asked. He spent several minutes listening to her heart through her back, and then through her chest. When he was finished he exhaled, like someone not willing to keep fighting. “No more than six months. You got that?”

“Yes, sir.” Mary Catherine felt the exhilaration surging in her veins. It wasn’t the kind of joy she’d known the other night in Marcus’s arms. But it was something better, given the circumstances.

It was a plan.

She could check one more thing off her dream list and maybe while she was busy working with kids and babies in Africa she would get better. Stranger things had happened, right? Look at little Jalen.

The doctor left her to get dressed. She could hardly believe it was going to

happen. Sure, her doctor was reluctant. But still he had cleared her to go to Africa. Her favorite nurse drew her blood that day. Sally Hudson. Sally was small and pretty with blue eyes and a warm smile. She was quick with a kind word or a Bible verse.

Usually when Mary Catherine needed it most.

“Hey, honey.” Sally sounded subdued as she led Mary Catherine to a chair in the lab. “I heard about your tests.”

“I still don’t believe it.” She held out her arm so Sally could reach her vein. “I keep thinking there has to be a mistake.”

“Well, don’t you go believing everything a doctor says.” Sally put a stretchy band around Mary Catherine’s upper arm as she felt around for the vein. “In 2001 I was diagnosed with leukemia. No one in my family was a match.”

She inserted the needle in such a way that Mary Catherine didn’t feel a thing. Sally smiled at her. “Doctors told me I didn’t stand a chance without a bone marrow transplant. So I did the only thing I could do. I cried out to Jesus.” The nurse focused on the blood draw. “Changed my whole life.”

Mary Catherine appreciated the story. “You look super healthy.”

“A few years later they found a donor. Perfect stranger. Perfect match.” She finished filling three vials with Mary Catherine’s blood. “Only God has the number of your days.”

“I believe that.”

“You have one chance to write the story of your life. Make it a bestseller.” Sally put a piece of cotton and a bandage over Mary Catherine’s arm on the place where the needle had been. “Look at this.” She took a framed photo from the desk behind her. “This is my family. My daughter Angie had us all meet in Ohio for a family reunion. That’s me and my husband. Our four kids and ten grandkids. That was the day we had our annual candy-making.” Sally had never looked happier. “If I listened to every awful thing a doctor told me, I would never have prayed for a miracle.”

Mary Catherine held onto Sally Hudson’s words long after she left the office. But as she drove home through heavy traffic she let her mind drift. She was no longer stuck on an LA freeway. In her mind, she was on Marcus’s back deck, dancing beneath the stars, feeling the amazing attraction and lost in his arms. *Stop*, she told herself. There was no point thinking like that.

She would go to Africa and she would believe the trip might even be good for her. She would watch for symptoms and head back if her blood work or tests or pain level changed. She had to go. The trip would give her the one thing she desperately needed, the one thing she had to figure out before she changed her mind.



JAG WAITED AT the door of the examination office, Aspyn at his side. They were both stunned. “I didn’t see this coming.”

“How could we have?” Aspyn looked ready to fight, ready to take action. Only this time there was nothing to act against. They could do nothing about this problem.

Because it was inside Mary Catherine’s chest.

“The enemy will stop at nothing.” Anger filled Jag’s heart. Illness was part of a fallen world, the handiwork of the darkest forces on earth. “There has to be something we can do.”

They had known Mary Catherine had a heart condition. That she would need a valve transplant in a few years. Not a big deal, they figured.

But this . . .

“We have to find a reason for her to stay.” Aspyn’s eyes blazed. “We need to ask Orlon.”

“And pray for wisdom.” Jag was in his element here in LA. But a heart condition? One that threatened to take Mary Catherine’s life in less than a year? “It will take all of heaven pulling together.”

They watched as Dr. Cohen typed his notes, filling out a report on his visit with Mary Catherine. The man sat alone in his office. He looked deeply defeated. A call came in and he answered it.

Jag and Aspyn listened intently.

“I told her I consulted with you and that we all agree.” The doctor stared out the window. “No . . . I didn’t tell her that.” He paused. “It’s such an unusual case. She isn’t sick enough for a transplant today. But six months from now . . . you’re right. It might be too late.” He released a tired sigh. “She’s in serious trouble.” He waited. “Yes, I know. I tried to tell her.”

“It’s worse than we think.” Jag’s voice was distant.

“There’s nothing more we can do.” Aspyn’s tone was broken. “It will have to be another Angels Walking team. Months from now.”

“In Africa?” Jag’s frustration nearly overwhelmed him. “We have to think of a way to keep her here, in Los Angeles. With Marcus.”

It was a dilemma they’d battled for the past week. Finding ways to keep Mary Catherine and Marcus together. Jag’s mind raced, still every time an idea came to him the impossibility was greater. Especially now that Mary Catherine was determined to leave.

Aspyn was right. They seemed out of options.

They moved to the waiting room, where Mary Catherine was filling out a

stack of paperwork. Jag felt the heaviness in the room, the deep discouragement coming from Mary Catherine. *It's okay, dear girl*, he wanted to tell her. *Jesus isn't finished with you*. This Angels Walking mission might be nearly over.

But they hadn't lost yet. The greater battle was still at stake. Jag forced himself to hold on to that truth.

Even if the next stage of the war took them to the opposite ends of the earth.

Hoofstuk 27

~

A

gesien van Donderdag se groepbyeenkomste by die polisiestasie en 'n kuiertjie Saterdag saam met Sami en Tyler, kry Mary Catherine dit reg om Marcus vir die res van die week te ontwyk.

Sy het nie 'n keuse nie.

Haar afspraak by die dokter is Maandagoggend, en toe sy daar aankom, weet sy dat die pyn in haar hart niks met haar gesondheid te doen het nie. Die aand saam met Marcus was die beste aand van haar lewe. Sy het die waarheid gepraat toe sy dit vir Marcus gesê het.

Marcus Dillinger se aantrekkingskrag is vir haar sterker as enige iets wat sy tot nog toe ervaar het. Sy het die aand al 'n duisend keer in haar gedagtes herhaal, en sy is elke keer seker. Sy sou niks anders wou doen nie. Hy het haar laat lag en laat voel, en sy teenwoordigheid in haar lewe is goed en reg en volkome.

Teen die tyd toe hulle op die balkon gaan staan het ná die snoekerspel het Mary Catherine niks meer omgee oor haar stukkende hart en die tyd wat sy nie het nie. Sy het daardie een aand gehad. Dit was al waaraan sy kon dink.

Die ontvangsdame roep haar naam. 'Die dokter wil jou eers sien. Ons sal die bloedtoetse en die vorms later doen, net voor jy gaan.'

'Goed.' Sy volg die vrou na die bekende ondersoekkamer, trek die hospitaaljurkie aan en wag.

Dokter Cohen verskyn 'n paar minute later.

'Mary Catherine.' Hy skud haar hand. Sy gesig is somber. 'Ek is jammer oor hierdie ding.' Hy lig 'n wenkbrou en skud sy kop. 'Dit het my onkant gevang.' Hy trek 'n stoel nader en sit oorkant haar. 'n Hartoorplanting is

altyd 'n moontlikheid vir iemand met jou toestand, maar ek het regtig gedink 'n klep is al wat jy nodig het.'

Mary Catherine het heelwat navorsing op die internet gedoen. 'Ek het 'n paar vrae neergeskryf.' Sy haal haar selfoon uit. 'Kan ek maar vra?'

'Natuurlik.' Hy vou sy arms en wag.

Sy maak die notas-app oop en begin met die eerste vraag. 'Waarom kan ons nie eers 'n klepvervanging doen nie? Dit is nie so radikaal nie, en dit sal ons meer tyd gee.' Sy kyk na dokter Cohen. 'Of hoe?'

'Wel.' Hy hou sy kop skeef, eers na die een kant en dan na die ander kant, asof hy die moontlikhede oorweeg. 'Ek het laasjaar 'n pasiënt gehad wie se aorta-klep en stygende aorta ons probeer vervang het. Dis presies dieselfde soort operasie wat ons met jou sal doen.' Hy skud sy kop. 'Jong man, net twintig jaar oud. Hy het onder die operasie 'n hartaanval gekry, wat baie skade aangerig het. Hy moes veertig keer resussiteer word voordat die operasie verby was.'

Dokter Cohen verduidelik verder dat die operasie soveel skade aan die jong man se hart veroorsaak het dat hy dadelik bo aan die waglys geplaas is. 'Ek is dankbaar om te kan sê dat hy sy hart gekry het. Dit gaan nou goed met hom.'

Mary Catherine gryp na sy laaste woorde. 'Dit kan goed gaan met 'n mens wat 'n oorplanting gehad het?'

'Ja.' Die dokter klink versigtig. 'Daar is byna twee honderd duisend pasiënte wat op 'n hart wag. Die toestande moet net reg wees.'

'Maar as ...'

'Dis 'n lang pad, maar ja. Ons weet van hartoorplantingpasiënte wat twintig, vyf-en-twintig jaar na hul operasie nog lewe. Dit gebeur nie dikwels nie, maar dit is moontlik.'

Moontlik.

Vir die eerste keer sedert die dokter se oproep 'n week gelede voel Mary Catherine nie meer asof sy val nie. Die donkerte wat al haar hoop en lig en energie opgesuig het, kry 'n krakie, en sy kan weer blou lug sien. 'Ek ... ek het dit nie geweet nie.'

'Dit werk nie altyd so nie. As 'n pasiënt 'n nuwe hart kry ...' Hy lig weer 'n wenkbrou. 'As ... wel, partykeer bly die pasiënt swak vir 'n paar jaar, en dan verloor ons hulle. Hul liggaam verwerp die hart, of andersom. Baie dinge kan verkeerd loop.'

'Dokter Cohen.' Mary Catherine glimlag. 'U ken my beter as dit. Ek is nie 'n baie-dinge-kan-verkeerd-loop soort meisie nie. Ek glo in skrale moontlikhede.' Hulle het al hieroor gepraat. 'Onthou Dokter?'

'Ja.' Hy glimlag geduldig. 'Want dit is waar God die beste werk.'

'Presies.' Sy probeer om nie aan Marcus te dink nie. 'Ek het 'n plan gehad om

nie verlief te raak nie. Gegewe my situasie.’ Haar glimlag kom nie maklik nie. ‘Maar uit wat u pas vir my vertel het, lyk dit asof daar tog hoop is.’

‘Vir liefde?’ Die dokter het ’n manier om na haar te kyk asof sy sy geliefde dogter is.

‘Vir die lewe. Om regtig te lewe.’

‘Jou situasie is ingewikkeld, Mary Catherine. Ek wil jou nie vals hoop gee nie.’

‘Hoop kan nie vals wees nie. Dit is die produk van geloof, om oortuig te wees van dinge wat ons nie sien nie.’ Sy blaas haar asem uit en probeer weer kalm word. ‘Ek het nie geweet hartoorplantingpasiënte kan so lank lewe nie. Dis al.’

‘Ek is bevrees ek het nog nuus, Mary Catherine.’

Sy knip haar oë en staal haarself. ‘Reg.’

Dokter Cohen maak sy notaboek oop en bespreek haar toetsuitslae in besonderhede. Haar situasie is erger as wat hy verwag het. Erger as wat Mary Catherine gedink het.

‘Jy sal kort voor lank simptome begin ervaar. Moeg en kortasem voel.’ Hy kyk na haar, strenger as voorheen. ‘Jy moet al die dinge inkort wat jou adrenalien laat pomp. Ek weet dit sal vir jou moeilik wees.’

Mary Catherine staar eers na die dokter en toe na die vloer voor haar. ‘Adrenalien?’ Sy mompel die woord en kyk weer na hom. Haar hele lewe is een lang adrenalien-storm. ‘Soos ... vryval?’

‘Ja, natuurlik. En branderplankry ... hardloop ... kompeterende sport. Alles wat jou hart te hard laat werk.’

Die donkerte is terug. ‘Dokter vra my nou om op te hou lewe.’

‘Nee.’ Hy sug en maak sy notaboek toe. ‘Mary Catherine, ek vra jou net om rustiger te raak. Jy moet ernstig wees hieroor. Tot ons vir jou ’n hart kan kry.’

Sy knik, maar sy voel hoe sy val ... net soos voorheen. ‘En dokter dink dit sal ses maande vat voor ek op die waglys is?’

‘Ja.’ Hy frons. ‘Ek is jammer. Jy sal een keer ’n week ’n berader moet sien oor hoeveel aktiwiteite jy kan toelaat, en watter gesondheidsorg toepaslik is terwyl jy op die waglys is. Ons het ook ’n hele klomp bloedtoetse om vandag te doen en ...’

Mary Catherine hoor nie ’n woord nie. Hy praat verder, vertel haar wat van haar vereis word en hoe haar lewe sal verander terwyl sy wag om op die waglys geplaas te word. En dat sy dalk vinniger op die lys kan kom as sy oor ’n paar maande weer getoets word en die uitslae baie slegter is as nou. Al waaraan Mary Catherine kan dink, is adrenalien, en die feit dat dit haar hart skade aandoen.

Die ding wat haar lewendig laat voel, neem jare van haar lewe weg.

Dokter Cohen verduidelik iets anders – dat sy nie heeltemal siek genoeg is om op die lys te wees nie, maar dat sy spoedig daar sal wees. Maar Mary Catherine dink aan die kinders op haar yskas, die kinders wat sy borg. Sê nou sy kry nie 'n oorplanting nie? Of kry een, maar dit werk nie? Sy sal nooit weer tyd hê om Afrika toe te gaan nie, om daar te woon en die mense te leer ken nie. Sy het nog altyd daarvan gedroom.

En sy kan nie vir Marcus kry nie, dit is nou duidelik.

Ten minste kan sy Afrika hê. 'Dokter Cohen.' Sy het hom seker in die rede geval; hy lyk soos iemand wat in die middel van 'n sin stilgemaak is. 'Ek is jammer. Ek moet Dokter iets vertel.'

'Ek verstaan dat dit baie moeilik is.' Hy was nog altyd geduldig met haar. 'Wat is dit?'

'Ek gaan Afrika toe. Binne 'n maand.' Sy kan dit nie as 'n vraag stel nie. Hy sal nooit toelaat dat sy gaan nie. 'Ek gaan vir ses maande in Uganda woon.' Sy besef sy klink 'n bietjie intens. Sy probeer doelbewus haar stemtoon versag. 'Ek het net gedink dat u ... moet weet.'

'Mary Catherine, jy kan nie na Uganda toe gaan nie. Nie terwyl ons probeer om jou op die oorplantingswaglys te kry nie.'

'Wel, u doen vandag die toetse, nie waar nie? As daar addisionele toetse is, kan dit in Uganda gedoen word. Hulle het 'n hospitaal. Die resultate kan hierheen gestuur word.'

Dokter Cohen is onkant gevang. 'Wel, dit sal ... heeltemal ongewoon wees. Jy sal bereid moet wees om dadelik terug te kom, die oomblik as ons jou op die waglys het.'

'Ek verstaan.' Sy beleef 'n stuwing van vreugde. Haar beskadigde hart het al soveel van haar geëis; sy gaan dit nie ook gee nie. Sy sal Kalifornië so gou as moontlik verlaat. 'n Week by elke ouer bly, en dan Uganda toe gaan. Sy het bande met 'n bediening daar en hulle soek altyd vrywilligers. As sy kan, sal sy vir die volgende ses maande 'n weeshuis bou. Iets wat vir jare vorentoe van nut kan wees.

As sy dan nie self tot nut kan wees nie.

'Ek moet sê, Mary Catherine, ek is heeltemal teen 'n skuif Uganda toe gekant. Weens jou hart se toestand.'

'Ek het nie simptome nie. Ek voel wonderlik.' Sy dink hoe sy en Marcus 'n paar aande gelede gedans het. 'Eintlik beter as wonderlik. As ek ooit Uganda toe wil gaan, moet ek dit nou doen. Voordat ek begin om ... die simptome waarvan u praat, te voel.'

Dit lyk asof die dokter nie weet wat om te sê nie. 'Hoe gou kan 'n mens van Uganda af hierheen kom? Vind dit eers vir my uit. Jy sal 'n paar dae nodig hê, dink ek.' Hy haal sy bril af en vryf oor sy voorkop. 'Ek weet nie of jy soveel

tyd sal hê nie.'

'Ek sal nie so lank bly nie. Wanneer ek siek begin voel, sal ek huis toe kom.'

'Jy verstaan dat dit lynreg indruis teen my raad oor adrenalien?' Dokter Cohen sit sy notaboek langs hom neer. 'Ek vra jou om die lewe rustig te benader, en jy vertel my jy gaan Uganda toe.'

'Dis 'n rustige plek, dokter Cohen. Regtig.' Sy glimlag. 'Geen pretparke nie, geen vryval nie. Baie eenvoudige leefwyse.'

'Kom ons doen die bloettoetse en vorms.' Hy staan op en sit die stetoskoop op sy ore. 'Laat ek eers luister.' Hy beweeg agter om haar en druk op haar rug. 'Haal diep asem.'

Mary Catherine trek lug in haar longe.

'Weer.'

Sy doen dit. Hy luister 'n hele paar minute na haar hart, eers deur haar rug en toe deur haar borskas. Toe hy klaar is, blaas hy sy asem uit, soos iemand wat nie langer wil baklei nie. 'Nie meer as ses maande nie. Hoor jy?'

'Ja, Dokter.' Mary Catherine voel hoe die vreugde deur haar are vloei. Dit is nie die soort vreugde wat sy in Marcus se arms gevoel het nie. Dit is beter, gegewe die omstandighede.

Dit is 'n plan.

Sy sal nog een item op haar droomlysie kan aftik, en wie weet? Miskien word sy beter wanneer sy met die kinders en babas in Afrika werk. Wonderwerke gebeur, nie waar nie? Kyk na Jalen.

Die dokter gaan uit sodat sy kan aantrek. Sy kon skaars glo dat dit gaan gebeur. Haar dokter is wel baie onwillig, maar hy het haar nie verbied om Afrika toe te gaan nie. Haar geliefkoosde verpleegster kom trek haar bloed. Sally Hudson. Sy is klein en mooi met blou oë en 'n warm glimlag. Sy is altyd gereed met 'n vriendelik woord of Bybelvers.

Gewoonlik presies wanneer Mary Catherine dit nodig het.

'Hallo.' Sally klink bedruk toe sy Mary Catherine na 'n stoel in die laboratorium lei. 'Ek het gehoor van jou toetse.'

'Ek kan dit nog steeds nie glo nie.' Sy hou haar arm uit sodat Sally 'n aar kan vind. 'Ek dink die hele tyd daar moet iewers 'n fout wees.'

'Wel, moet ook nie alles glo wat 'n dokter sê nie.' Sally sit 'n rekverband om Mary Catherine se boarm sodat die aar kan uitstaan. 'Ek is in 2001 met leukemie gediagnoseer. En daar was nie 'n geskikte skenker in my familie nie.'

Sy steek die naald so in dat Mary Catherine niks voel nie. Sally glimlag. 'Die dokters het gesê ek het nie 'n kans as ek nie 'n beenmurgoorplanting kan kry nie. Toe doen ek die enigste ding wat ek kon. Ek het die Here Jesus aangeroep.' Die verpleegster fokus op haar werk. 'Dit het my hele lewe

verander.'

Mary Catherine hou van die storie. 'Jy lyk supergesond.'

'Hulle het 'n paar jaar later 'n skenker gekry. 'n Vreemdeling, maar presies reg vir my.' Sy maak drie proefbuisies vol bloed. 'Ons lewensdae is in sy boek opgeskryf.'

'Ek glo dit.'

Sally plak 'n stukkie watte en 'n pleister op Mary Catherine se arm. 'Kyk hier.' Sy wys na 'n geraamde foto op die lessenaar agter haar. 'Dit is my familie. My dogter Angie het ons almal in Ohio vir 'n familiesaamtrek bymekaar laat kom. Dis ek en my man, ons vier kinders en tien kleinkinders.' Sally lyk dolgelukkig op die foto. 'As ek na alles geluister het wat die dokter gesê het, sou ek nooit vir 'n wonderwerk gebed het nie.'

Mary Catherine onthou Sally se woorde lank nadat sy die spreekkamer verlaat het. Maar toe sy deur die namiddagverkeer huis toe ry, neem haar gedagtes hul eie loop. Sy is nie meer op 'n snelweg in Los Angeles nie. In haar gedagtes is sy op Marcus se balkon, dans hulle onder die sterre, voel sy die aangetrokkenheid tussen hulle daar in sy arms. *Stop*, sê sy vir haarself. Daar is geen sin in sulke gedagtes nie.

Sy sal Afrika toe gaan en sy sal glo dat die besoek haar goed sal doen. Sy sal op die uitkyk wees vir simptome en terugkom as die uitslae van die bloedtoetse of haar pynvlakke verander. Sy moet gaan. Die besoek sal haar die een ding gee wat sy nodig het, die een ding wat sy moet uitsorteer voordat sy van plan verander.

Hoe om afskeid te neem van Marcus Dillinger.

~

Jag en Aspyn wag by die deur van die spreekkamer. Hulle voel al twee verbysterd. 'Ek het dit nie verwag nie.'

'Hoe kon ons?' Aspyn lyk gereed vir 'n geveg, gereed om tot aksie oor te gaan. Maar daar is niks om teen te veg nie. Hulle kan niks doen aan hierdie probleem nie.

Want dit sit binne-in Mary Catherine se borskas.

'Die vyand sal vir niks stuit nie.' Jag is woedend. Siekte is 'n deel van die gevalle wêreld, die werk van die donkerste magte op aarde. 'Daar moet iets wees wat ons kan doen.'

Hulle het geweet van Mary Catherine se hartprobleem. Hulle het geweet sy moet oor 'n paar jaar 'n klepvervangings kry. En dit het nie te ernstig geklink nie.

Maar hierdie ding ...

'Ons moet 'n rede kry wat haar sal laat bly.' Aspyn se oë brand. 'Ons moet

met Orlon praat.’

‘En om wysheid bid.’ Jag is in sy element in Los Angeles. Maar ’n hartprobleem? Een wat Mary Catherine moontlik minder as ’n jaar gee om te lewe? ‘Dit sal die hele hemel se samewerking kos.’

Hulle kyk hoe dokter Cohen sy notas tik en ’n verslag skryf van Mary Catherine se besoek. Hy is alleen in sy spreekkamer. Hy lyk moedeloos. Sy telefoon lui en hy beantwoord dit.

Jag en Aspy n luister aandagtig.

‘Ek het haar gesê ek het met jou gekonsulteer en dat ons saamstem.’ Die dokter staar by die venster uit. ‘Nee ... ek het nie daardie deel gesê nie.’ Hy bly stil. ‘Dit is so ’n ongewone geval. Sy is nie siek genoeg vir ’n oorplanting nie. Maar oor ses maande ... jy is reg. Dan kan dit te laat wees.’ Hy sug moeg. ‘Sy is in groot moeilikheid.’ Hy wag. ‘Ja, ek weet. Ek het probeer verduidelik.’

‘Dis nog erger as wat ons gedink het.’ Jag se stem klink afwesig.

‘Daar is niks wat ons nog kan doen nie.’ Aspy n klink gebroke. ‘Dit sal ’n ander span moet wees. Maande van nou af.’

‘In Afrika?’ Jag se frustrasie wil hom oorweldig. ‘Ons moet aan ’n manier dink om haar hier te hou, in Los Angeles. By Marcus.’

Dit is ’n dilemma waarmee hulle al ’n week lank worstel. Hoe om ’n manier te vind om Mary Catherine en Marcus bymekaar te hou. Jag maak allerhande planne, maar elke keer kan hy sien dat dit nie kan werk nie. Veral nou dat Mary Catherine vasbeslote is om weg te gaan.

Aspy n is reg. Hul planne het opgedroog.

Hulle gaan na die wagkamer waar Mary Catherine sit en vorms invul. Jag voel die moedeloosheid in die kamer. Dit kom van Mary Catherine af. *Toemaar, liewe kind*, wil hy sê. *Jesus is nog nie klaar met jou nie*. Hierdie engelesending is egter byna verby.

Maar hulle het nog nie die stryd gewonne gegee nie. Daar is ’n groter stryd wat wag. Jag dwing homself om aan daardie waarheid vas te hou.

Selfs al neem die volgende stadium van die stryd hulle na die ander kant van die wêreld.



MARCUS COULD FEEL HER slipping away. He picked Mary Catherine up each Tuesday and Thursday for the meetings with Lexy at the police station, but no matter what he suggested, she wouldn't spend time with him. Not alone.

Tyler and Sami were talking with Alicia, while Marcus, Mary Catherine, and Lexy listened. The program had been incredibly beneficial for both girls. At least it seemed that way. They hadn't had a run-in with the law, and every week they opened up a little more.

Lexy planned to be homeschooled by her grandmother for the next few years and get a job. She didn't know what the future held, but she was finished with the WestKnights. She had made that decision two weeks ago. Even sent texts to everyone in the gang. She got some pushback, but nothing like what she expected.

Sadly, there were plenty of girls ready to ride shotgun with guys from a gang.

The conversation now was about future plans, what Alicia would do in the coming months while the school year played out. Marcus tried to listen, but he struggled to focus. Mary Catherine was sitting beside him. He could feel the way she moved, sense the way she loved these lost girls.

She consumed him. There was nothing he could do to change the fact.

He let his mind drift. The two of them never talked about what had happened between them that night at his house, and he didn't push for answers. When they said goodbye he could see the pain in her eyes, the same pain that stayed with him whenever they were apart. It was insane to think that he hadn't figured out what a treasure she was until the beginning of January.

Now it was the first Thursday in February, the last meeting at the police station with the girls. Tomorrow morning Marcus and Tyler would leave for Glendale, Arizona. Spring training would begin Saturday. And then he wouldn't see her for two months.

For some reason, Marcus had the sense he didn't have long with Mary Catherine. Maybe because he was leaving tomorrow. But it was more than that. He couldn't quite get his mind around the feeling. Yet still it was there. No matter how hard he tried or how much he prayed, he couldn't find his way back to that moment with her in his arms, under the stars on his deck.

Marcus had thought of a hundred scenarios. Reasons she wasn't willing to think about dating him. Plausible possibilities for why she wouldn't talk to him about it. Some days he figured there must be something going on back in Nashville, something she had to make right before she could move on. Maybe it was someone her parents wanted her to marry.

Or maybe that was it. Her parents. Maybe they wouldn't approve of her dating a biracial guy. Whenever that thought crossed his mind, Marcus always dismissed it. If race had been an issue, she would've said something by now.

There were times when he thought maybe she had something physically wrong with her. Like she couldn't have kids or she was allergic to baseball diamonds. Maybe she'd suffered some traumatic event as a child and she wasn't able to form lasting connections with people. That was a legit disorder, right?

Marcus shifted in his seat, his eyes on Alicia, who was still talking.

Whatever the reason, there was no denying it. The feeling was there each time they were together. And lately she had kept her distance again, the way she had when they first started hanging out.

A few days ago after the meeting with the girls, Marcus and Mary Catherine took Lexy to the youth center. The new director was doing a great job. His work meant that Marcus could stop by when he wanted to, pay for pizza each week, and still get on with baseball. For now that was a more realistic setup.

That night they had played a pickup game of basketball with some of the teens who were there. When it was over he and Mary Catherine had high-fived. But when he tried to hold her hand, she eased away from him. "Gotta get water!" she had told him.

Sure, she had been out of breath. But that wasn't why she left so quickly.

Marcus tried to stay in the moment. Alicia was done talking. She smiled at Tyler and then at Sami. "Is it okay if . . . I still meet with you? Like once a month or something?" She looked uncomfortable for the first time that afternoon. "I think I might really need that."

Involvement in the program after the first four weeks was optional. But all of them were willing to help. At least they'd agreed on that at the beginning.

Tyler stroked his chin, clearly trying to find an answer for the girl. "Marcus and I leave in the morning for a few months." He looked at Sami.

"I'll be here." Sami reached over and patted Alicia's hand. "We can definitely meet."

"Me, too?" Lexy looked from Sami to Mary Catherine. "Could we maybe all meet?"

"I want to." Mary Catherine was quick with her answer. "But I'm not sure about my schedule."

Sami smiled. "I can promise you girls this. I'll be available for both of you. Once or twice a month at least. But let's talk and text more than that."

Marcus sat back in his seat and looked at Mary Catherine. Something had just happened, but he couldn't figure out what. Why wasn't Mary Catherine

saying anything? How come she didn't offer to meet with the girls? He met her eyes, but she looked away. A sick feeling started in his stomach and quickly moved to his heart.

Just like he thought, she was pulling away. Not just from him, but from all of them. Whatever else happened, he had to get to the bottom of this. Figure out what was wrong and why she was distancing herself. By tomorrow it would be too late to sort out what was happening, to hear what was going on in her heart. So that left just one option.

He would have to find out tonight.



MARY CATHERINE COULDN'T look Marcus in the eyes. They were all four going out to dinner after the final meeting with the girls. She had already told Sami her plans to move to Africa. She would tell the guys tonight. At the same time.

The session ended, and Officer Charlie Kent joined them along with a few new volunteers. Mary Catherine recognized one of the women as Aspy, the neighbor who had pushed Marcus out of the way the night of the shooting at the youth center. Mary Catherine and the woman exchanged a smile.

Officer Kent asked the four of them to talk about how they thought the program had gone, and then finally he turned to the girls. "Would either of you like to tell our new volunteers about the difference this time has made?"

Mary Catherine didn't expect either of them to say anything. They'd come miles since a month ago. But that didn't mean they would share here. But even as she was telling herself the reasons Lexy wouldn't talk, the girl raised her hand. "I'd like to say something."

Lexy sat up straighter. Something else she wouldn't have done at the beginning of the program. "Before, I just always assumed I'd be in prison one day." Her eyes looked tender. "Like my mama." She turned to Marcus and then Mary Catherine. "I didn't know I had a choice. But now I know I got someone who cares about me. I don't need to hang with the guys, risking prison and getting killed. I belong somewhere else now."

Moments like this Mary Catherine wondered if she was making the right decision. Maybe she was supposed to stay in Los Angeles and help Lexy. She could stay out of Marcus Dillinger's way and keep from falling in love with him. And never—no matter what—have a night like the one at his house. If she could do that, she could stay.

But she would miss her one chance at Africa.

When Officer Kent was finished, the group dispersed. Aspy walked up to Mary Catherine. "Remember me? From the youth center that night."

“Of course.” Mary Catherine would never forget. Marcus was alive today because of this woman.

“I wondered if you heard about the latest situation. The kids on the street are talking about the program.” Aspyn smiled. She put her hand on Mary Catherine’s. “You’ve done a wonderful job.”

“Thank you.” Looking into the woman’s eyes was like looking into the ocean. They were that light, that complex.

“Anyway”—Aspyn glanced at the door—“there’s another dozen girls ready to go through what Lexy did. But we only have a handful of volunteers.” Aspyn gave Mary Catherine a single sheet of paper. “This describes the need.” She smiled. “I told Officer Kent I’d ask you to stay on. You and Sami. The city really needs you.”

Mary Catherine looked at Marcus across the room. He was talking to Tyler, his long legs and filled-out shoulders reminding her of what it felt like to be in his embrace. She looked back at Aspyn. “I’m afraid I may not be staying in Los Angeles.” She took the piece of paper. “I’ll keep it in mind, though.”

“Okay.” Aspyn didn’t move. She looked deep into Mary Catherine’s eyes. “Just remember . . . you don’t have to go halfway around the world to find a place to help out. The need is very great right here.” She smiled again and then slipped her purse onto her shoulder and headed for the door.

For a few seconds Mary Catherine wondered how Aspyn knew. How was that possible? Had she somehow talked to Sami? Or was she just guessing, assuming Mary Catherine might be leaving for some sort of mission work?

The woman had to still be just outside. Mary Catherine hurried to the door to call after her, but the parking lot was mostly empty. Just a few cars, nothing and no one else. She took a few steps out the door and looked to the left and then to the right. The woman had already driven away.

But her message remained.

It was a message Mary Catherine would keep with her. So that she would know there was a place for her here. If she was ever healthy enough to come back and take on work like this again. For now, she didn’t dare dream of a time like that. She looked at Marcus again and felt the now-familiar hurt. No, she would stay in Uganda until she was sick enough to need a heart. Then she’d come back.

Not a day sooner.



MARCUS MADE RESERVATIONS at Gladstones in Malibu. A bit of a drive, but not bad considering the beautiful winter night. The moon was full, so he requested

a table by the window. They arrived a few minutes early and found the place nearly empty.

Exactly as Marcus hoped it would be.

With his and Tyler's flight to Arizona set for the morning, anything that needed to be said had to be said now. Tonight. They took their table and chatted about the Last Time In program while they ordered and waited for their food. Only then did Sami look at Tyler and Marcus and finally Mary Catherine.

"I have an announcement." She folded her hands and smiled. "I can't believe I did this, but I quit my job!"

"What?" Mary Catherine lived with her, and she apparently hadn't heard anything about this. She laughed softly. "And you say I'm impulsive."

"I know. You changed me." Sami laughed, too. "I didn't make up my mind till today at work. I decided my time had to be worth more than handling public relations for businesses and movie stars." She grinned at Marcus. "So I took the marketing and community affairs job at the youth center. I'll mostly work from home, but I'll be there a few days a week."

Tyler looked hesitant about her decision. "I told her it was too dangerous. It's one thing to meet with the girls at the police station. But the youth center . . ." He took Sami's hand and paused for a moment. His smile started in his eyes as he looked at her. "I'm happy for you, Sami. And I'm proud of you." He turned to the others. "She told me it was something Mary Catherine would do."

Marcus sat next to Mary Catherine across from the other two. Mary Catherine was about to say something, he could sense that much. But he had the worst feeling that whatever it was, he didn't want to hear it.

Then just when he wasn't sure he could take another moment of her pulling away from him, beneath the table Marcus felt Mary Catherine reach for his hand. She didn't let go. "Sami, you'll be perfect. The community is ready for change. I really believe that."

"After working with the Last Time In program, I figured I had to make a change." Sami smiled at Mary Catherine. "Because you have to live your life, right?"

"Right." Mary Catherine gave Marcus's hand a slight squeeze. "Speaking of which . . ." Her smile looked weak. "I have an announcement, too."

Only Sami didn't seem surprised. She simply turned approving eyes toward her friend and waited.

Mary Catherine looked at Sami and then Tyler. "I'm moving to Africa. I'll leave here in the middle of the month to spend a few weeks with my parents in Nashville. Then I'm off to Uganda."

Marcus released her hand. He turned to her, but she wouldn't look at him, wouldn't face him. He worked to keep his tone even. "What . . . brought this on?"

"I've been planning it." Finally she turned to him. Her eyes begged him to understand. "It's something I've always dreamed of doing. I just got clearance a few days ago."

Clearance? Marcus felt like he was going to be sick. He wanted to take Mary Catherine down to the beach and hear the real story, the reasons she would've chosen to leave. Especially now, when she was making such an impact with Lexy. When she had admitted feelings for him. He struggled to keep his tone even. "What do you mean, clearance?"

"I've been in contact with a ministry in Uganda. They need someone to coordinate the building of a new orphanage." Again her smile didn't reach her eyes. "We figured it out this week." She tried to sound upbeat, but she was definitely failing. "I'm their girl."

There was nothing Marcus could say. Any conversation about the issue would have to happen later, when they were alone. If they were alone. Tyler and Sami made small talk about Africa and how Tyler had always wanted to take a mission trip there. Maybe one day they would all go.

The banter did nothing to ease the devastation Marcus was feeling. Halfway through dinner he thought of another question. "How long will you live there?"

"That's the good news." She hadn't tried to take his hand again. "Only six months. I should be able to make sure the orphanage is built and established in that time."

Marcus did the math. Six months meant she'd be back sometime in August or September. Just when baseball season would be wrapping up. Was this why she hadn't wanted a relationship? Because she knew that behind the scenes she was working to move to Uganda?

In some ways the idea was better than the other scenarios Marcus had imagined. He'd be busy pitching and traveling. He was frustrated she hadn't told him sooner, but six months away didn't have to be the end of things between them. They could talk and Skype, right?

He felt bad for pulling his hand away. He reached for hers and she willingly let him. This time he slid his fingers between hers. The way they'd never held hands before. She smiled at him, a sad sort of smile, and again her eyes said more than her words could. At least here.

"Everything will be so different tomorrow." Tyler put his arm around Sami's shoulders. "Sami told me she might make a trip to Arizona halfway through spring training." He smiled at Mary Catherine. "She hoped maybe

you'd come with her."

"Yeah." Mary Catherine frowned. "She told me that earlier today. I would have. If the move to Uganda hadn't come through."

Marcus wished she'd quit calling it a move. She was taking a trip. Nothing more. He wasn't going to let her go, not until she told him she didn't care about him.

A somberness hung over the table as they finished eating. Tyler was right. Come tomorrow everything would be different. But Marcus wasn't finished with tonight. He would drive her home and they would finish this conversation later. She didn't have to be afraid of being gone for six months. He would've waited much longer than that.

He could hardly wait to tell her.

Hoofstuk 28

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M

arcus kan voel dat hy besig is om haar te verloor. Hy laai Mary Catherine elke Dinsdag en Donderdag op vir die byeenkoms saam met Lexy by die polisiestasie, maar wat hy ook al voorstel en hoe hard hy probeer, sy weier om alleen saam met hom te kuier.

Tyler en Sami gesels met Alicia, en Marcus, Mary Catherine en Lexy sit en luister. Die program het baie vir die twee meisies beteken, of so wil dit voorkom. Hulle het nog nie weer moeilikheid met die gereg gehad nie, en elke week maak hulle 'n bietjie meer oop.

Lexy beplan om vir die volgende paar jaar tuis by haar ouma skool te gaan en dan werk te soek. Sy weet nie wat die toekoms inhou nie, maar sy is klaar met die WestKnights. Sy het die besluit twee weke gelede geneem. Sy het dit selfs vir almal in die bende met SMS'e laat weet. Sy het bitsige antwoorde teruggekry, maar nie soveel as wat sy verwag het nie.

Daar is meer as genoeg meisies wat ongelukkig meer as gewillig is om saam met die bendelede te gaan.

Hulle gesels oor die toekoms, oor wat Alicia in die komende maande, tot die einde van die skooljaar, wil doen. Marcus probeer luister, maar hy sukkel om te konsentreer. Mary Catherine sit langs hom. Hy voel aan hoe lief sy vir hierdie verlore meisies geraak het.

Sy het totaal van hom besit geneem. Niks wat hy kan doen, sal iets aan hierdie

feit verander nie.

Sy gedagtes neem die loop. Hulle het nog nooit weer gesels oor wat gebeur het toe sy daardie aand by hom gekuier het nie, en hy dring nie op antwoorde aan nie. Toe hulle gegroet het, kon hy die pyn in haar oë sien, dieselfde pyn wat hy ook ervaar wanneer hy nie by haar is nie. Hy kan nie verstaan hoekom hy eers teen die begin van Januarie agtergekom het hoe 'n juweel sy is nie.

Dit is nou die eerste Donderdag in Februarie, en die laaste ontmoeting by die polisiestasie saam met die meisies. Môreoggend vertrek Marcus en Tyler na Glendale in Arizona. Die lenteafgigting begin Saterdag. En hy gaan haar vir twee maande nie sien nie.

Om die een of ander rede voel hy aan dat hy nie meer baie tyd saam met Mary Catherine het nie. Miskien omdat hy môre weggaan, maar hy dink nie dit is al rede nie. Hy kan die gevoel nie heeltemal verstaan nie, en dit gaan ook nie weg nie. En hoe hard hy ook al probeer en hoeveel hy daarvoor bid, hy kan nie sy pad terugkry na die oomblik toe sy onder die sterre op sy balkon in sy arms gestaan het nie.

Marcus kan aan honderde redes dink. Redes waarom sy nie met hom wil uitgaan nie. Aanneemlike redes waarom sy nie met hom daarvoor wil praat nie. Party dae dink hy dit is omdat daar iets in Nashville aan die gang is, iets wat sy eers moet gaan regmaak voordat sy kan aangaan. Miskien is dit iemand met wie haar ouers wil hê sy moet trou.

Of miskien is dit haar ouers. Miskien keur hulle nie 'n man van gemengde afkoms goed nie. Maar wanneer daardie gedagte by Marcus opkom, vee hy dit dadelik van die tafel af. As ras 'n probleem was, sou sy iets gesê het.

Soms dink hy dat sy die een of ander fisieke gebrek het. Soos dat sy nie kinders kan hê nie, of allergies is vir bofbalvelde. Miskien het sy as kind 'n traumatiese ervaring gehad wat tot gevolg het dat sy nie standhoudende verhoudings met mense kan vorm nie. Dit is tog seker 'n geldige probleem, of hoe?

Marcus skuif rond op sy stoel, sy oë op Alicia, wat nog aan die gesels is.

Wat ook al die rede vir haar afsydigheid, een ding staan vas. Elke keer as hulle by mekaar is, is die gevoel daar. En op die oomblik bly sy op 'n afstand, net soos aan die begin.

Marcus en Mary Catherine het Lexy 'n paar dae gelede, na die groepbyeenkoms, na die jeugsentrum toe geneem. Die nuwe direkteur doen uitstekende werk. Dit beteken dat Marcus die sentrum kan besoek wanneer hy wil, vir elke week se pizza betaal, en genoeg tyd hê vir bofbal. Tans is dit die beste werkwyse vir hom.

Daardie aand het hulle saam met die tieners wat daar was, basketbal gespeel. Toe dit verby was, het hy en Mary Catherine mekaar 'n vatvyf gegee. Maar

toe hy probeer om haar hand vas te hou, het sy haar hand weggetrek. 'Ek wil gaan water haal,' was haar rede.

Sy was nou wel uitasem, maar dit was nie die rede waarom sy so vinnig weg is nie.

Marcus probeer sy aandag by die oomblik bepaal. Alicia het klaar gepraat. Sy glimlag vir Tyler en toe vir Sami. 'Dink julle julle kan ... my nog kom sien? So een keer 'n maand of iets?' Sy lyk vir die eerste keer daardie middag ongemaklik. 'Ek dink ek het dit regtig nodig.'

Betrokkenheid by die program na die eerste vier weke is opsioneel. Maar almal is gewillig om verder te help. Ten minste, dit was wat hulle aanvanklik besluit het.

Tyler vryf oor sy ken. Hy probeer om 'n antwoord te vind. 'Ek en Marcus gaan môre vir 'n paar maande weg,' sê hy, en kyk na Sami.

'Ek is nog hier.' Sami gee Alicia se arm 'n sagte kloppie. 'Ons kan beslis nog bymekaar kom.'

'Ek ook?' Lexy kyk van Sami na Mary Catherine. 'Kan ons almal bymekaar kom?'

'Ek wil graag,' sê Mary Catherine dadelik. 'Maar ek is nie seker hoe my program gaan lyk nie.'

Sami glimlag. 'Ek kan julle twee belowe dat ek beskikbaar is vir al twee van julle. Een of twee keer 'n maand. En ons kan tussen-in dikwels bel of SMS.'

Marcus sit terug en kyk na Mary Catherine. Iets het pas gebeur, maar hy kan nie verstaan wat dit is nie. Waarom sê Mary Catherine niks? Hoekom bied sy nie aan om saam met die meisies te kuier nie? Hy kyk in haar oë, maar sy kyk weg. 'n Siek gevoel ontstaan in sy maag en beweeg op na sy hart.

Net soos hy gedink het: Sy is besig om weg te raak. Nie net van hom nie, maar van hulle almal. Wat ook al gebeur, hy moet hierdie ding uitpluis. Uitvind wat verkeerd geloop het en waarom sy haar op 'n afstand hou. Teen môre sal dit te laat wees om alles uit te sorteer, om te hoor wat in haar hart is. Hy het dus net een opsie.

Hy moet vanaand uitvind.

~

Mary Catherine kan nie na Marcus kyk nie. Hulle vier gaan vanaand saam uiteet. Sy het reeds vir Sami van haar planne om Afrika toe te gaan, vertel. Sy sal die mans vanaand vertel. Al twee gelyk.

Die byeenkoms eindig en offisier Charlie Kent en 'n paar nuwe vrywilligers sluit by hulle aan. Mary Catherine sien vir Aspy, die vrou wat Marcus uit die pad gestamp het met die skietery by die jeugsentrum, onder hulle. Hulle glimlag vir mekaar.

Offisier Kent vra die vier vriende uit na die verloop van die program, en draai toe na die meisies. ‘Wil een van julle ons nuwe vrywilligers vertel van die verskil wat die program gemaak het?’

Mary Catherine verwag nie dat een van die twee iets sal sê nie. Hulle het baie gevorder sedert hulle aangesluit het, maar dit beteken nie dat hulle dit hier sal vertel nie. Maar terwyl sy redes uitdink waarom Lexy niks sal sê nie, lig dié haar hand. ‘Ek wil graag iets sê.’

Lexy gaan sit regop. Dit is nog iets wat sy nie aan die begin sou doen nie. ‘Ek het altyd gedink ek sal eendag in die tronk beland.’ Haar oë versag. ‘Soos my ma.’ Sy draai na Marcus en Mary Catherine. ‘Ek het nie geweet ek het ’n keuse nie. Maar nou weet ek daar is Iemand wat vir my omgee. Ek hoef nie by die bende te bly, tronk toe te gaan of dalk doodgemaak te word nie. Ek behoort nou by ’n ander plek.’

In oomblikke soos hierdie wonder Mary Catherine of sy die regte besluit geneem het. Miskien is sy veronderstel om in Los Angeles te bly en Lexy te help. Sy kan mos uit Marcus Dillinger se pad bly en ophou om lief te wees vir hom. En nooit weer – al gebeur wat – ’n aand soos die een by sy huis toelaat nie. As sy dit kan regkry, kan sy mos bly.

Maar dan sal sy haar enigste kans om Afrika toe te gaan, misloop.

Toe Offisier Kent klaar is, gaan die groep uitmekaar. Aspyn gaan na Mary Catherine toe. ‘Onthou jy my? Ek was daardie aand by die jeugsentrum.’

‘Ja, natuurlik.’ Mary Catherine sal dit nooit vergeet nie. Marcus het sy lewe aan hierdie vrou te danke.

‘Ek wonder of jy al van die jongste situasie gehoor het. Die kinders op straat praat oor die program.’ Aspyn glimlag. Sy sit haar hand op Mary Catherine s’n. ‘Jy het ’n wonderlike ding hier gedoen.’

‘Dankie.’ Om in die vrou se oë te kyk, is soos om in die oseaan te kyk. Hulle is net so vol lig en net so kompleks.

‘In elk geval.’ Aspyn kyk na die deur. ‘Daar is nog omtrent twaalf meisies wat ook die program wil doen, net soos Lexy. Maar ons het te min vrywilligers.’ Aspyn gee Mary Catherine ’n enkele bladsy. ‘Hierdie bladsy beskryf die behoefte.’ Sy glimlag. ‘Ek het offisier Kent belowe ek sal jou vra of jy nie wil aanbly nie. Jy en Sami. Die stad het julle regtig nodig.’

Mary Catherine kyk na Marcus aan die ander kant van die vertrek. Hy is besig om met Tyler te gesels, en sy lang bene en breë skouers herinner haar aan hoe sy in sy omhelsing gevoel het. Sy kyk terug na Aspyn. ‘Ek is bevrees ek gaan moontlik nie hier in Los Angeles bly nie.’ Sy neem die stuk papier. ‘Maar ek sal dit in gedagte hou.’

‘Goed.’ Aspyn bly staan. Sy kyk diep in Mary Catherine se oë. ‘Onthou net ... jy hoef nie halfpad om die aarde te gaan om ’n plek te kry waar jy kan help

nie. Die nood hier by jou is baie groot.’ Sy glimlag weer en sit haar handsak oor haar skouer. Toe gaan sy uit.

Vir ’n paar sekondes wonder Mary Catherine hoe Aspyn weet. Hoe is dit moontlik? Het sy met Sami gepraat? Of raai sy net, en neem sy sommer aan dat Mary Catherine wil weggaan omdat sy sendingwerk wil gaan doen?

Die vrou moet nog buite wees. Mary Catherine gaan vinnig by die deur uit om haar te roep, maar die parkeerarea is feitlik leeg. Net ’n paar motors, en geen mense nie. Sy stap ’n entjie weg en kyk oral om haar rond. Die vrou is klaar weg.

Maar haar boodskap het vasgesteek.

Dit is ’n boodskap wat Mary Catherine sal bybly. Sy sal weet daar is vir haar ’n plek hier in Los Angeles. As sy ooit gesond genoeg is om terug te kom en hier te werk. Maar vir die huidige durf sy nie daaroor droom nie. Sy kyk weer na Marcus en voel die bekende pyn. Nee, sy sal in Uganda bly tot sy siek genoeg is om ’n hart nodig te kry. Dan sal sy terugkom.

Nie ’n dag vroeër nie.

~

Marcus het plek bespreek by Gladstones in Malibu. Dit is taamlik ver, maar dit is so ’n mooi winteraand dat die rit deel van die aand se plesier is. Die maan is vol, en hy het ’n tafel by die venster bespreek. Hulle kom ’n paar minute vroeg en vind dat die restaurant feitlik leeg is.

Presies soos Marcus gehoop het.

Omdat hy en Tyler môre Arizona toe vlieg, moet alles wat gesê moet word, vanaand gesê word. Vanaand. Hulle gaan sit en begin oor die Laaste Keer In-program gesels terwyl hulle bestel en op hul kos wag. Toe kyk Sami na Tyler en Marcus en laastens na Mary Catherine.

‘Ek het ’n aankondiging.’ Sy vou haar hande saam en glimlag. ‘Ek kan self nie glo ek het dit gedoen nie, maar – ek het bedank.’

‘Wat?’ Mary Catherine woon saam met haar, maar dis duidelik dat sy niks hiervan geweet het nie. Sy lag sag. ‘En jy sê ek is impulsief.’

‘Ek weet. Dis jy wat my verander het.’ Sami lag ook. ‘Ek het eers vandag by die werk finaal besluit. Ek het besluit my tyd is meer werd as om reklame vir sakeondernemings en filmsterre te reël.’ Sy glimlag vir Marcus. ‘En toe het ek die bemerkings- en gemeenskapsdienspos by jou jeugsentrum aanvaar. Ek sal meestal van my huis af werk, maar ek sal ’n paar dae elke week soontoe gaan.’

Tyler lyk ’n bietjie onseker oor haar besluit. ‘Ek het vir haar gesê ek dink dis te gevaarlik. Dis een ding om die meisies by die polisiestase te ontmoet. Maar die jeugsentrum ...’ Hy neem Sami se hand en dink vir ’n paar

Miskien kan hulle almal gaan. Maar die gekorswel kan niks doen om die verlatenheid wat Marcus omvou, te verlig nie. Halfpad deur die ete dink hy

aan nog iets. 'Hoe lank gaan jy daar bly?'

'Dis die goeie nuus.' Sy probeer nie weer sy hand neem nie. 'Net ses maande. Ek behoort in daardie tyd die weeshuis gebou en aan die gang te kry.'

Marcus maak 'n paar vinnige berekenings. Ses maande beteken sy sal in Augustus of September terug wees. Net mooi as die bofbalseisoen klaarmaak. Is dit hoekom sy nie 'n verhouding met hom wou hê nie? Omdat sy besig was om te reël om Uganda toe te gaan?

Op 'n manier is dit 'n beter rede as die ander waaraan Marcus gedink het. Hy sal immers die hele tyd besig wees met bofbal en baie rondreis. Hy voel gefrustreerd omdat sy dit nie vroeër gesê het nie, maar ses maande weg hoef mos nie 'n verhouding tussen hulle onmoontlik te maak nie. Hulle kan steeds bel en Skype, of hoe?

Hy voel sleg omdat hy sy hand weggeneem het. Hy neem weer haar hand, en sy laat dit toe. Hierdie keer laat hy sy vingers tussen hare gly. Hulle het nog nooit so hande vasgehou nie. Sy glimlag vir hom, 'n hartseer soort glimlag, en haar oë sê meer as wat woorde kan. Ten minste hier.

'Alles gaan môre anders wees.' Tyler sit sy arm om Sami se skouers. 'Sami het gesê sy kan dalk halfpad deur die lente-afrigting Arizona toe kom.' Hy glimlag vir Mary Catherine. 'Sy het gehoop jy sou kon saamkom.'

'Ja.' Mary Catherine frons. 'Sy het my vroeër vandag vertel. Ek sou. As die trek Uganda toe nie uitgewerk het nie.'

Marcus wens sy wil ophou om dit 'n trek te noem. Dis 'n besoek. Niks meer nie. Hy gaan haar nie laat gaan tensy sy vir hom sê sy gee niks vir hom om nie.

'n Sombereheid hang oor die tafel toe hulle die maaltyd afsluit. Tyler is reg. Môre gaan alles anders wees. Maar Marcus is nog nie klaar met vanaand nie. Hy sal haar huis toe neem en hulle sal hul gesprek klaarmaak. Sy hoef nie bang te wees om ses maande weg te gaan nie. Hy sal veel langer vir haar wag. Hy kan nie wag om dit vir haar te sê nie.

29



MARY CATHERINE WAS QUIET on the drive back to her apartment. Halfway there, Marcus asked if she could come back to his house. So they

could talk about her trip.

"I really can't." They weren't holding hands this time. "I have to work tomorrow."

Marcus didn't respond.

She hated this, hated the look in his eyes. He didn't understand, and she couldn't blame him. The trip to Uganda worked in her favor. Her leaving meant she had one reason why it wasn't an option to give in to their feelings. Their lives were going in different directions.

They were both quiet until they reached the apartment. She wanted to talk to him. This was the last time they'd see each other for a long time. Maybe forever—depending on how things went with her heart. She couldn't let him leave here upset with her.

"Walk me up?"

"That's all? Just walk you up and say goodnight and that's it?" He wasn't angry, just confused. She could see that much in his eyes. She understood. The chemistry between them, the attraction and pull—it was undeniable. They had so much in common. She prayed God would give her the words to help them both understand.

"Sami's out with Tyler." Mary Catherine smiled at him as they reached her apartment door. "Come in. Please."

He looked relieved. The truth was, neither of them were willing to say goodbye yet. Once they were inside they sat together on the sofa. The lights in the room were dim—perfect for the farewell ahead.

The space between them felt like an ocean. Marcus pulled one leg up so he could face her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wasn't sure." Mary Catherine didn't want to hurt him. She had never meant to get involved so quickly. "I mean, I always talked about Africa."

"Not moving there." His tone wasn't antagonistic. He only wanted to make sense of what was happening.

"It . . . came together quickly."

Marcus exhaled and for a minute he looked away, looked at the apartment and the photos on the walls. "You've never asked me inside before."

"I wanted to." He was dissolving her defenses again. "I just . . . I didn't want either of us to get hurt."

"That's what this is about?" He reached for her hand and again she let him take it. "I'm not worried about getting hurt. What I feel when I'm with you . . . it goes all the way to my soul."

Mary Catherine nodded. "I know." She eased her fingers between his. "It's that way for me, too. With you."

"So what's six months? You miss baseball season, big deal."

"I don't want to miss it. I want to be at every game." She paused. "I watched you pitch that World Series win from right here."

He looked in her eyes, to the places only he had ever seen. "I wish I'd known you then."

"Me, too." She ran her thumb over his hand. "I've thought about this. How we've gotten so close so fast." She tried to smile, but it didn't touch the sadness in the air between them. "I think it was all the tragedy. The shooting. Jalen. Lexy. Even the program."

"And our faith." He looked like he wanted to slide closer to her. But he kept his distance. "Your most beautiful crazy amazing faith made me take a harder look at God. The Bible. One day after we were together I drove out to Dodger Stadium and gave my life to the Lord. It was the day before I was baptized."

"Mmm. I didn't know." It was another reason why the connection between them was so strong. What they shared was more than physical and emotional attraction. It was spiritual. If only she had more time.

Marcus didn't look away. "What did Aspyntell tell you today?"

"She said the program needs more volunteers. She was hoping I'd stay on for another round."

"See . . . that's what I don't get." He leaned his shoulder into the sofa and looked at her. As if maybe the answers were in her eyes.

She loved the way his pale blue sweater made his eyes look even lighter. The connection between them was so strong it breathed life into her. At least it felt that way.

"I wish . . ." His voice was thick with emotion. "I wish you would let me love you, Mary Catherine."

Tears clouded her view. She had known tonight would be difficult, but she hadn't expected this. All she wanted was to be in his arms again, kissing him under the stars as if she had ten thousand more nights like this.

She didn't want him to see her cry. Without saying a word, she stood and walked to the window. She leaned on the frame and looked at the dark sky. Through the glare of the streetlight she couldn't see a single star.

There was no need to turn around. She could feel him coming to her, the way she always felt his presence when he was near. He slid his arms around her shoulders and pulled her to him. "That makes you sad? That I want to love you?"

With all her being she wanted to stay facing the window, to keep from turning into his embrace. But she could no more stop herself than she could tell herself not to breathe. Or her heart not to beat.

"Marcus." She turned and faced him and nothing else in all the world

mattered. "It makes me sad because you can't."

He didn't want to fight with her. That much was evident in his eyes. They were deep and afraid and full of the most incredible love. All at the same time. He nodded. "Okay." For a moment it looked like they might kiss. Because neither of them was strong enough to resist this kind of pull. He ran his thumb softly over her cheekbone. "I'll wait then. Till we're both back here. When the season's over and you've had your time in Africa."

A quiet terror ran through her veins. She wasn't getting through to him. If he waited for her, things would only be worse. He would be devastated when he learned the truth. And that wasn't fair. Her health was her problem. "That's just it." She searched for the next words. "I might not come back, Marcus. I might stay in Nashville."

A new sort of fear filled his expression. "You can't do that." He worked his fingers back into her hair. "Please. Tell me you'll come back here."

"Sometimes . . . it just can't work." She thought about telling him the whole truth . . . or lying to him, convincing him she wasn't interested. But he would never believe her. Not when she was seconds away from changing her mind about Africa. That was the effect he had on her. She put her hand on his chest. If only her heart were as strong as his. Her eyes searched to the deepest places in his soul. "Can you understand that?"

"No." He held her closer, and for a few seconds he brushed the side of his face against hers. "I won't understand that. I'll wait for you. And if you don't come back here, Mary Catherine"—he looked into her eyes again—"I'll find you."

There was no fighting her feelings. Love fell like autumn leaves around her, filling her heart and soul and senses. She lifted her face to his as easily as if they'd loved each other all their lives. The kiss started slowly, desperately. But the passion came quickly and made Mary Catherine feel things she'd never felt. She understood how easily two people could fall.

Even the air around her felt like something from a dream. Like all her life had led to this one single moment. She kissed him again. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He kissed her jaw and her cheekbone. "What if God made us for such a time as this? To be together?"

"I can't." She was drowning. If she didn't step back from him now, she might say things she'd regret, make promises she could never keep. She was breathing hard. They both were. She put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself. "Could you . . . could you be my friend? While I'm gone?"

The muscles in his jaw tensed. For a long time he thought about her question. Mary Catherine knew why. Marcus didn't want to be just her friend. She didn't want that either. But it was all she could offer him.

Finally he nodded. "Yes." His wanting her was still in his eyes, the way she was sure it was still in hers. "If it means staying in touch with you. Sharing my heart with you. Then, yes." He pulled her close again, and this time they shared a hug. Nothing more. He ran his hand over the back of her head. "I'll be your friend, Mary Catherine. If that's what you want."

The moment was ending—Mary Catherine could sense it. She took a half step back and looked at him one last time, memorizing his face. "If . . ." Tears filled her eyes and she had to blink to see him clearly. "If I was going to love someone . . . it would be you."

She put her hands on either side of his face and one last time she kissed him. The feeling was different than just a moment ago. Because this time—once again—the kiss meant goodbye. "I always said I could only love a guy who was real." She smiled. "Remember? When you said you wanted real?"

He nodded, never breaking eye contact with her. "I meant you. I told you you're the most rare kind of real."

"You, too. I mean it, Marcus." She pressed her fingers beneath her eyes. "I've never met a man like you. And for what it's worth . . . it nearly kills me . . . to say goodbye."

He didn't understand. She could see that in his expression, in the depth of his heart. But she'd said all she could say. He mustn't know about her heart. She wouldn't tell him. This night would not turn into an hour of pity, of worrying about her and convincing her not to leave. She had to go to Africa. The move was the one right thing she could do in the little time she had left.

She walked with him to the door and stepped outside with him. He hugged her one last time. "I'll email you. I'll text and call. Whatever way I can get to you." He smiled, but tears glistened in his eyes, too. "I'll be the best friend you ever had."

The sound that came from her was more cry than laugh. "I believe it." She allowed herself to get lost in his eyes one last time. This was what she had prayed for, what she had hoped for. That he wouldn't leave here upset or angry. She placed her hand against his cheek. "Thank you."

There was no need to explain. Marcus was clearly willing himself to understand.

He kissed her forehead, and then he stepped back and held up his hand. "Bye, Mary Catherine."

"Bye."

The distance between them hurt more with every step he took. She wondered what could possibly be worse. A love that might only last a year . . . or feeling the pain of watching him go?

She stood there until he drove off and then she didn't try to stop the tears.

Her empty arms ached from missing him. And he hadn't been gone five minutes. She lifted her face to the sky. "I don't like to ask why, God." She hugged herself, the tears still streaming down her face. "There's a reason you gave me this heart. I know."

A wave of exhaustion came over her. She leaned against the apartment door and the sobs began to come. Quiet, full-body sobs. She was going to be okay. This was the life God had given her. Soon she would begin to feel symptoms of her failing heart. She would feel tired and short of breath and she would know the end was near.

Whether they found a heart for her or not.

When that happened she would let herself relive this night again and again, replaying it from her place in a cold hospital room. And she would feel once more what it felt like for just an hour to be loved. Really loved. And when the time came to leave this place for heaven, she would do so with a full and healed heart. Because she would know at least this much.

She had spared Marcus Dillinger the pain of loving her.



MARCUS COULDN'T STOP the tears.

He brushed at them, angry and unsure of everything. Why couldn't she believe him? He would wait for her. Six months . . . six years. Whatever it took. He didn't want to love anyone but her.

But if she wanted his friendship, he would give her that. It was his only hope, and probably more than she'd planned on offering him. Whatever the reason.

Instead of going home that night he went by Coach's house. He needed to talk in the worst way. He pulled up in front of the Waynes' and texted him. *You home?*

The response came quickly. *Sure. What's up?*

I'm out front. Can you come here?

The porch light was on in less than a minute, and Coach Wayne stepped out in shorts and a sweatshirt. He walked to the SUV and slid into the passenger seat. "Marcus."

"Coach."

He looked concerned. "You okay?"

Marcus couldn't remember anyone seeing him cry. He kept his composure. "I'm in love with Mary Catherine."

Coach Wayne visibly relaxed. He smiled. "That's a good thing, right?"

"No." Marcus wasn't sure how to explain the situation. He was still trying to understand it himself. "I mean, she doesn't want me. Or she doesn't want

love.” He looked straight ahead, but all he could see was her face, her green eyes. “She told me she only wants to be friends.”

“Hmmm.” His smile faded. “I didn’t know.”

“She’s moving to Uganda.” Marcus looked at his coach again. “For six months.”

“I knew that. She talked to Rhonda about it.”

Marcus wished he could’ve heard that conversation. Hopefully Rhonda Wayne tried to talk Mary Catherine into staying. Not that it mattered now. She was leaving. Her mind was made up.

“She said I could keep in touch with her . . . while she’s gone.”

“But you want more than friendship.”

“Yes.” Marcus kept a rope around his emotions. He needed answers, not pity. “What do you think? Can I be her friend and still . . . pursue her?”

“I think so. Ultimately the One who knows best is God.” Coach Wayne gave him a pat on his knee. “If she’s part of the plans He has for you, then yes. Chase that girl, Marcus. You’ll know when it’s time to let her go. If that time comes.”

Marcus nodded. He liked how Coach said that. There was only one other thing he wanted to do. “Would you pray with me?”

“Of course.” Coach Wayne kept his hand on Marcus’s knee. “Father, You know how we men need to chase. Give Marcus the ability to do both—love and chase—even in the form of a friendship. At least until You make Your plans for his life clear. Keep Mary Catherine safe and grow the connection between her and Marcus according to Your will. Thank You, God, ahead of time. We trust You in all this. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

“Amen.” Marcus felt a little better. “Thanks.”

“You got it. We can talk more on the plane if you want.” He opened the car door. “See you in the morning.”

Marcus drove home, his heart still heavy. He had no idea when he’d see Mary Catherine again. He was back to baseball for now.

Back to chasing sunsets.

He thought about Shelly and how he hadn’t known whether he had pursued her or she had pursued him. The idea sounded ridiculous now. But then, he had never known what it meant to want to pursue a girl until Mary Catherine.

If God would allow him to chase after her, he would do so every day, with all his heart. He would pray for her and check in on her often. She wanted his friendship, so there would be good days ahead. Times when they would text and laugh and tease. Times when they would share their hearts and fears and hopes and dreams. Even from different continents. And not for one day would

he think about giving up on her.

Not unless God Himself made that clear.



TYLER AMES MADE the drive to Sami's grandparents' house early the next morning. Two hours before the flight to Arizona. There was something he had to ask them, something that couldn't wait.

Her grandfather opened the door. It was only seven thirty, but already the older man was dressed in a stylish dark gray suit, ready for the next power meeting. "Tyler." He opened the door and Tyler stepped inside. The man looked slightly bothered. "How've you been?"

"Well, thank you." He shook the man's hand. "You?"

"We'd like to see our granddaughter more often." He softened a bit. "Of course, we've been at our San Francisco home." He chuckled, but he made no attempt to invite Tyler into the house. "We've only been back a week."

"She told me she's planning to come by. Maybe tonight."

"Perfect." Mr. Dawson studied him. "You look good, Tyler. Coaching now, isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir. It's going better than I hoped." Tyler needed to get the question out. If he didn't get back on the road soon he'd miss his ten o'clock flight. "Anyway, I came because Sami and I have gotten very close."

The man remained unmoving. As if he had no idea what was coming.

"We share the same faith, same dreams and goals." Tyler could feel sweat on his palms. He would probably be one of the few guys in history turned down at this phase of "the ask." He put the thought out of his head. "Anyway, before I leave for Arizona this morning, I wanted to ask you."

Mr. Dawson blinked. "Ask me what, young man?"

"For Sami's hand in marriage. I want to marry her, sir." Regardless of what happened next, Tyler felt a rush of joy. Just saying the words left his heart practically bursting.

Tyler really wasn't sure what Sami's grandfather was going to do next. For several seconds he only stood there, like he was either in shock or thinking of a way to tell Tyler no.

But then his expression changed and his eyes grew damp. "Tyler." He hesitated. "I believe I owe you an apology."

"Sir?"

"You see . . ." His chin quivered and he shook his head, clearly trying to find the words. "When you left Samantha . . . she was never the same." He put his hand on Tyler's shoulder. "I vowed you would never break her heart again." He allowed the hint of a smile. "Can you promise me that, Tyler? That

you'll never break her heart again?"

Tyler gave the man a hug, the kind a father and son might share at a reunion. "Yes, sir. With everything I am, I promise you."

Mr. Dawson stepped back and this time his smile stretched across his face. "Well, then. My answer is yes. You have my blessing."

Sami's grandmother joined them. "What's this?" She was wiping her hands on a dish towel. When she saw Tyler she stopped short. "Hello, Tyler. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." He was one step closer to marrying Sami. The whole world was okay. "I asked your husband's permission to marry Sami." He hesitated. "Samantha."

"And I said yes." Mr. Dawson put his arm around his wife. "Looks like we'll be hosting a wedding!"

Sami's grandma hugged him. "We're very proud of you, Tyler. Of the man you've become. I'm sure Samantha will be very happy."

"Any idea when you'll ask her?" Mr. Dawson crossed his arms.

"Soon. If I can pull my ideas together." Tyler grinned. He'd never felt so sure of anything. "I have spring training first. But sometime after that."

He wrapped up the conversation, got back in his car, and headed to the airport. They wouldn't have much money, not at first, anyway. His salary with the Dodgers was still entry level. And now she'd taken the job at the youth center. The pay was half what she'd made at the PR firm. But none of that mattered.

There was nothing but sunshine and happy days ahead.

He was about to ask Sami Dawson to marry him.

Hoofstuk 29

~

M

ary Catherine is stil op pad terug na haar woonstel toe. Op pad vra Marcus of hulle na sy huis toe kan gaan sodat hulle oor haar besoek kan gesels.

'Ek kan regtig nie.' Hulle hou nie meer hande vas nie. 'Ek moet môre gaan werk.'

Marcus sê niks.

Sy kan nie die kyk in sy oë verdra nie. Hy verstaan nie, en sy kan hom nie blameer nie. Die skuif Uganda toe werk in haar guns. Haar weggaan is 'n rede

waarom sy nie die opsie het om toe te gee aan haar gevoelens nie. Hul lewens gaan in verskillende rigtings beweeg.

Hulle is al twee stil tot hulle by haar woonstel kom. Sy wil met hom gesels. Dit sal die laaste keer in 'n lang tyd wees dat hulle mekaar sien. Miskien sien hulle mekaar nooit weer nie – dit sal van haar hart afhang. Sy kan nie toelaat dat hy so ontsteld weggaan nie.

‘Stap saam met my?’

‘Dis al? Loop saam met jou tot by die deur en sê nag en dis al?’ Hy is nie kwaad nie, net verward. Sy kan dit in sy oë sien. En sy verstaan. Die vonk tussen hulle, die aangetrokkenheid kan nie ontken word nie. Hulle het soveel gemeen. Sy bid dat die Here haar die woorde sal gee wat sal help dat hulle al twee verstaan.

‘Sami is uit saam met Tyler.’ Mary Catherine glimlag vir hom toe hulle by die deur kom. ‘Wil jy inkom? Asseblief?’

Hy lyk verlig. Die waarheid is dat nie een van hulle gewillig is om nou al te groet nie. In die woonstel gaan sit hulle op die bank. Die ligte is dof – perfek vir die afskeid wat aan’t kom is.

Maar die afstand tussen hulle voel so groot soos die oseaan. Marcus trek een been op sodat hy direk na Mary Catherine kan kyk. ‘Hoekom het jy my nie vertel nie?’

‘Ek was nie seker nie.’ Mary Catherine wil hom nie seermaak nie. Sy het nooit bedoel dat hulle so vinnig by mekaar betrokke moet raak nie. ‘Ek bedoel, ek praat mos nog altyd van Afrika.’

‘Nie dat jy soontoe wil gaan nie.’ Sy stem is nie antagonisties nie. Hy wil net verstaan wat gebeur het.

‘Dit ... dit het alles vinnig tot 'n punt gekom.’

Marcus blaas sy asem uit en kyk weg, kyk na die woonstel en die foto's teen die muur. ‘Jy het my nog nooit voorheen ingenooi nie.’

‘Ek wou.’ Hy laat al weer al haar skanse tuimel. ‘Dis net ... ek wou nie hê een van ons moet seerkry nie.’

‘Is dit waaroor dit gaan?’ Hy neem haar hand; sy laat haar hand in syne bly. ‘Seerkry is die minste van my probleme. Wat ek voel wanneer ek by jou is ... dit gaan tot diep in my siel.’

Mary Catherine knik. ‘Ek weet.’ Sy roer haar vingers tussen syne. ‘Dis hoe dit vir my ook is. As ek by jou is.’

‘Wat is ses maande per slot van rekening? Jy mis die bofbalseisoen, dis al.’

‘Ek wil dit nie mis nie. Ek wil by elke wedstryd wees.’ Sy bly stil. ‘Ek het hier gesit en kyk na jou wengooi in die Wêreldreeks.’

Hy kyk in haar oë, so diep soos nog net hy al gesien het. ‘Ek wens ek het jou toe al geken.’

‘Ek ook.’ Sy vryf met haar duim oor sy hand. ‘Ek het daaroor nagedink. Hoe ons so vinnig so naby aan mekaar gekom het.’ Sy probeer glimlag, maar dit doen niks aan die hartseer in die atmosfeer nie. ‘Ek dink dit was alles wat gebeur het. Die skietery. Jalen. Lexy. En die program.’

‘En ons geloof.’ Dit lyk asof hy nader wil skuif, maar hy bly waar hy is. ‘Dit was jou wonderlike, uitsonderlike, sterk geloof wat my ook meer ernstig na God laat kyk het. Die Bybel. Dit was een aand nadat ons saam was dat ek na die stadion toe gegaan het en my lewe vir die Here Jesus gegee het. Dit was die dag voordat ek gedoop is.’

‘Mmm. Ek het nie geweet nie.’ Nog ’n rede waarom daar so ’n sterk band tussen hulle is. Wat tussen hulle is, is meer as fisieke en emosionele aangetrokkenheid. Daar is ook ’n geestelike band. As sy net meer tyd gehad het.

Marcus kyk nie weg nie. ‘Wat het Aspyn vandag vir jou gesê?’

‘Sy het gesê die program het nog vrywilligers nodig. Sy het gehoop ek sal aan nog ’n rondte kan deelneem.’

‘Daar is iets wat ek nie verstaan nie.’ Hy druk sy skouer in die bank se kussing en kyk na haar. Asof hy die antwoorde in haar oë sal vind.

Sy hou van die manier waarop sy blou trui sy oë ligter laat lyk. Die band tussen hulle is so sterk dat dit lewe in haar blaas. So voel dit vir haar.

‘Ek wens ...’ sy stem is vol emosie. ‘Ek wens jy wil my toelaat om vir jou lief te wees, Mary Catherine.’

Haar trane verblind haar. Sy het geweet vanaand gaan moeilik wees, maar sy het dit nie verwag nie. Al wat sy wil hê, is om in sy arms te wees en hom onder die sterre te soen asof daar nog tien duisend sulke nagte gaan wees.

Sy wil nie hê hy moet sien sy huil nie. Sonder ’n woord staan sy op en stap na die venster. Sy leun teen die raam en kyk na die naglug. Die straatligte se glans maak dat sy nie ’n enkele ster kan sien nie.

Dis nie nodig om om te draai nie. Sy voel hoe hy na haar toe kom, soos sy altyd sy teenwoordigheid aanvoel as hy in die nabyheid is. Hy sit sy arms om haar skouers en trek haar nader. ‘Dit maak jou hartseer? Dat ek jou wil liefhê?’

Met haar hele wese wil sy na die venster bly kyk, nie omdraai in sy omhelsing nie. Maar sy kan haarself net so min keer as wat sy vir haarself kan sê om op te hou asemhaal. Of vir haar hart sê om nie te klop nie.

‘Marcus.’ Sy draai om sodat sy na hom kan kyk, en niks anders op aarde maak saak nie. ‘Dit maak my hartseer omdat jy nie kan nie.’

Hy wil nie met haar stry nie. Dit kan sy in sy oë sien. Hulle is bodemloos en ook vol vrees en vol liefde, ongelooflike liefde. Alles tegelyk. Hy knik. ‘Goed.’ Vir ’n oomblik lyk dit asof hulle mekaar gaan soen. Want nie een van

hulle is sterk genoeg om dit te weerstaan nie. Hy vryf met sy duim oor haar wangbene. 'Ek sal wag. Tot ons al twee terug is. As die seisoen verby is en jy terug is uit Afrika.'

Sy voel hoe die angs deur haar spoel. Sy kry dit nie reg om hom te laat verstaan nie. As hy vir haar gaan wag, gaan dinge net erger word. Hy sal platgeslaan wees as hy die waarheid moet weet. En dit is nie regverdig nie. Haar gesondheid is haar probleem. 'Dis juis die ding.' Sy soek na die regte woorde. 'Ek gaan moontlik nie terugkom nie, Marcus. Ek gaan miskien terug Nashville toe.'

Daar is 'n nuwe soort vrees op sy gesig. 'Jy kan nie dit doen nie.' Hy trek sy vingers deur haar hare. 'Asseblief. Sê vir my jy gaan terugkom hierheen.'

'Partykeer ... kan dinge net nie uitwerk nie.' Sy oorweeg dit om hom die volle waarheid te vertel ... of om 'n leuen te vertel, hom te probeer oortuig dat sy nie belangstel nie. Maar hy sal haar nie glo nie. Nie as sy elke oomblik kan besluit om nie Afrika toe te gaan nie. Dis die effek wat hy op haar het. Sy sit haar hand op sy bors. As haar hart net so sterk soos syne was! Haar oë soek tot in die diepste plekke in sy siel. 'Kan jy dit verstaan?'

'Nee.' Hy hou haar stywer vas, en vir 'n paar sekondes raak sy wang aan hare. 'Ek sal dit nooit verstaan nie. Ek sal vir jou wag. En as jy nie terugkom nie, Mary Catherine,' hy kyk weer in haar oë, 'sal ek jou gaan soek.'

Sy kan nie langer teen haar gevoelens stry nie. Sy lig haar gesig so natuurlik na syne asof hulle mekaar nog hul lewe lank liefhet. Die soen begin stadig en 'n bietjie desperaat. Maar die passie kom gou en laat Mary Catherine dinge ervaar waarvan sy nie geweet het nie. Sy verstaan nou hoekom twee mense so maklik voor versoeking kan swig.

En sy wil nie ophou om so te voel nie. Sy soen hom weer. 'Ek is jammer.'

'Moenie wees nie.' Hy soen haar kakebeen en wangbeen. 'Sê nou die Skepper het ons gemaak vir 'n tyd soos hierdie? Om saam te wees?'

'Ek kan nie.' Sy is besig om te verdrink. As sy nie nou terugstaan nie, gaan sy dinge sê waaroor sy later spyt sal wees, beloftes maak wat sy nie kan hou nie. Sy haal vinnig asem. Al twee van hulle. Sy sit haar hande op sy skouers om haar ewewig te herwin. 'Kan jy ... sal jy my vriend wees? Terwyl ek weg is?' Die spiere in sy kakebeen verstyf. Hy dink 'n lang tyd na oor haar vraag. Mary Catherine weet hoekom. Hy wil nie net haar vriend wees nie. Sy wil dit ook nie hê nie. Maar dit is al wat sy hom kan aanbied.

Uiteindelik knik hy. 'Ja.' Sy verlange na haar is nog in sy oë; sy is seker hare na hom is in haar oë. 'As dit beteken ek kan kontak met jou behou. En my hart met jou deel. In daardie geval, ja.' Hy trek haar weer na hom toe, en hierdie keer omhels hulle mekaar, maar niks meer nie. Hy vee met sy hand oor haar agterkop. 'Ek sal jou vriend wees, Mary Catherine. As dit is wat jy

wil hê.’

Mary Catherine voel aan dat die oomblik aan die verbygaan is. Sy tree effens terug en kyk vir oulaas na hom, om sy gesig in haar geheue vas te lê. ‘As ...’ Daar is trane in haar oë en sy moet hulle knip om hom te kan sien. ‘As ek ooit iemand gaan liefhê ... sal dit jy wees.’

Sy sit haar hande aan weerskante van sy gesig en soen hom vir die laaste keer. Dit voel anders as ’n oomblik gelede. Want hierdie keer is dit – weer ’n keer – ’n afskeid. ‘Ek het altyd gesê ek kan net ’n ou liefhê wat eg is.’ Sy glimlag. ‘Onthou jy? Toe jy gesê het jy wil ’n meisie hê wat eg is?’

Hy knik, maar neem nie sy oë van hare weg nie. ‘Ek het toe aan jou gedink. Ek het vir jou gesê jy is die skaarsste soort eg wat daar is.’

‘Jy ook. Ek bedoel dit, Marcus.’ Sy druk met haar vingers onder sy oë. ‘Ek het nog nooit ’n man soos jy ontmoet nie. En vir wat dit werd is ... ek kan dit nie verduur ... om jou te groet nie.’

Hy verstaan nie. Sy kan dit aan sy uitdrukking sien, en in die diepte van sy hart. Maar dit is al wat sy kan sê. Hy mag nie weet van haar hart nie. Sy gaan hom nie vertel nie. Sy gaan nie toelaat dat die aand in ’n uur van bejammering ontaard nie, dat hy hom oor haar bekommer of haar probeer oortuig om nie weg te gaan nie. Sy moet Afrika toe gaan. Dit is die een regte ding wat sy nog kan doen in die kort tydjie wat sy oor het.

Sy stap saam met hom deur toe en loop saam na buite. Hy gee haar ’n laaste drukkie. ‘Ek sal e-pos. En SMS en bel. Wat ek ook al kan doen om kontak te maak met jou.’ Hy glimlag, maar daar is trane in sy oë. ‘Ek sal die beste vriend wees wat jy nog ooit gehad het.’

Die geluid wat sy maak klink meer soos ’n snik as ’n lag. ‘Ek glo dit.’ Sy laat haarself toe om vir oulaas in sy oë verlore te raak. Dit is wat sy gebid het, waarvoor sy gehoop het. Dat hy nie kwaad of ontsteld sal weggaan nie. Sy sit haar hand teen sy wang. ‘Dankie.’

Dis nie nodig om te verduidelik nie. Sy kan sien Marcus doen sy bes om te verstaan.

Hy soen haar voorkop, tree dan agteruit en hou sy hand in die lug. ‘Totsiens, Mary Catherine.’

‘Totsiens.’

Die afstand tussen hulle maak seerder met elke tree wat hy gee. Sy wonder wat erger kan wees. Liefde vir een jaar lank ... of die pyn om te sien hoe hy weggaan?

Sy staan daar totdat hy weggeroep het, en sy probeer nie eens om die trane te keer nie. Haar leë arms pyn soos sy hom mis. En hy is nog nie eens vyf minute weg nie. Sy lig haar gesig na die hemelruim. ‘Ek hou nie daarvan om hoekom te vra nie, Here.’ Sy slaan haar arms om haarself terwyl die trane by

haar wange afloop. 'Daar is 'n rede waarom U my hierdie hart gegee het. Ek weet dit.'

Sy voel skielik uitgeput. Sy leun teen die woonstel deur en toe kom die snikke. Snikke wat deur haar hele lyf ruk. Alles sal regkom. Dit is die lewe wat God haar gegee het. Sy gaan een van die dae die simptome voel wat aandui dat haar hart besig is om in te gee. Sy sal moeg en kortasem voel en sy sal weet dat die einde naby is.

Of hulle 'n hart vir haar kry of nie.

As dit gebeur, sal sy hierdie aand oor en oor in haar gedagtes herleef, daar in haar bed in die hospitaal. En sy sal weer ervaar hoe dit vir 'n uur lank gevoel het om bemin te word. Oprek bemin te wees. En as dit tyd is vir haar om die aarde vir die hemel te verruil, sal sy met 'n vol en gesonde hart gaan. Want sy sal een ding weet.

Sy het gekeer dat Marcus Dillinger die pyn ervaar om haar lief te hê.

~

Marcus kan sy trane nie keer nie.

Hy vee oor sy oë, kwaad en onseker oor alles. Waarom glo sy hom nie? Hy sal vir haar wag. Ses maande ... ses jaar. Wat dit ook al vra. Hy wil niemand anders as vir haar liefhê nie.

Maar as sy sy vriendskap wil hê, sal hy dit gee. Dit is sy enigste hoop, en waarskynlik meer as wat sy beplan het om aan te bied. Om watter rede ook al. Hy gaan nie huis toe nie, maar na sy afrigter toe. Hy moet met hom praat. Hy hou voor sy huis stil en stuur 'n SMS: *Is jy tuis?*

Die antwoord kom dadelik. *Ja. Is daar fout?*

Ek is voor die huis. Kan jy uitkom?

Die stoeplig gaan feitlik dadelik aan en Ollie Wayne kom uit in 'n kortbroek en sweetpaktop. Hy kom klim in Marcus se viertrek, en gaan sit langs hom. 'Marcus.'

'Ollie.'

Ollie lyk besorg. 'Is jy OK?'

Marcus dink nie iemand het hom al ooit sien huil nie. Hy probeer sy selfbeheersing behou. 'Ek is lief vir Mary Catherine.'

Ollie ontspan sigbaar. Hy glimlag. 'Dis 'n goeie ding, of hoe?'

'Nee.' Marcus is nie seker hoe hy die situasie kan verduidelik nie. Hy verstaan dit dan self nie. 'Ek bedoel, sy wil my nie hê nie. Altans, sy wil nie 'n verhouding hê nie.' Hy kyk reg voor hom, maar al wat hy kan sien, is haar gesig, haar groen oë. 'Sy sê sy wil net vriende wees.'

'Hmmm.' Die glimlag verdwyn. 'Ek het nie geweet nie.'

'Sy gaan Uganda toe.' Marcus kyk na sy afrigter. 'Vir ses maande.'

‘Ek weet. Sy het met Rhonda daaroor gepraat.’

Marcus sou graag wou weet wat hulle vir mekaar gesê het. Hy hoop Rhonda het probeer om Mary Catherine te laat bly. Nie dat dit nou saak maak nie. Sy gaan weg. Sy is vasbeslote.

‘Sy’t gesê ek kan kontak behou ... terwyl sy weg is.’

‘Maar jy wil meer as vriendskap hê.’

‘Ja.’ Marcus probeer sy emosies in toom hou. Hy het antwoorde nodig, nie simpatie nie. ‘Wat dink jy? Kan ek haar vriend wees en nogtans ... iets meer soek?’

‘Ek dink so. Op die ou end is die Here die Een wat die beste weet.’ Ollie gee hom ’n kloppie op sy knie. ‘As sy deel is van die plan wat Hy vir jou het, moet jy beslis ’n verhouding probeer bou. Jy sal weet wanneer dit tyd is om haar te laat vaar. As daar so ’n tyd kom.’

Marcus knik. Hy hou van Ollie se siening van die saak. Daar is nog een ander ding wat hy wil doen. ‘Sal jy saam met my bid?’

‘Natuurlik.’ Ollie hou sy hand op Marcus se knie. ‘Vader, u weet hoe ons mans vroue moet najaag. Gee Marcus die vermoë om al twee te doen – lief te hê en na te jaag – selfs in die vorm van ’n vriendskap. Totdat U u planne vir sy lewe duidelik gemaak het. Bewaar vir Mary Catherine en laat die verhouding tussen haar en Marcus volgens u wil ontwikkel. Dankie, Here, by voorbaat. Ons vertrou op U. In Jesus se Naam, amen.’

‘Amen.’ Marcus voel ’n bietjie beter. ‘Dankie.’

‘Alles reg. Ons kan op die vliegtuig verder gesels as jy wil.’ Hy maak die motordeur oop. ‘Sien jou môreoggend.’

Marcus ry met ’n swaar hart huis toe. Hy weet nie wanneer hy weer vir Mary Catherine sal sien nie. Hy is vir eers terug by bofbal.

Terug na die soektog na die pot goud.

Hy dink aan Shelly. Hy het nooit geweet of sy die een was wat hom agternasit, of andersom nie. Die hele idee voel nou belaglik. Maar toe het hy nie geweet hoe dit is om ’n meisie die hof te maak nie. Dit het eers gebeur toe hy Mary Catherine ontmoet het.

As die Hemelse Vader hom toelaat om haar die hof te maak, sal hy dit elke dag doen, met sy hele hart. Hy sal vir haar bid en dikwels kontak maak. Sy wil sy vriendskap hê, dus voorsien hy goeie tye vorentoe. Tye wanneer hulle kan SMS’e stuur en lag en mekaar terg. Tye om hul hartsgeheime en vrese en hoop en drome met mekaar te deel. Selfs op verskillende kontinente. En hy gaan nie vir ’n enkele dag daaraan dink om haar prys te gee nie.

Tensy die Vader self dit van hom vra.

Tyler Ames ry die volgende oggend vroeg na Sami se grootouers. Dit is twee uur voor sy vlug Arizona toe. Daar is iets wat hy hulle moet vra, en dit kan nie wag nie.

Haar oupa maak die deur oop. Dit is skaars halfagt, maar hy is reeds aangetrek in 'n stylvolle grys pak, gereed vir sy volgende belangrike direksievergadering. 'Tyler.' Hy maak die deur oop en Tyler gaan in. Die man se gesig lyk 'n bietjie besorg. 'Hoe gaan dit?'

'Baie goed, dankie.' Hy skud die man se hand. 'En met u?'

'Ons wil graag meer van ons kleindogter sien.' Sy stemtoon versag effens. 'Nou ja, ons was die afgelope tyd in San Francisco.' Hy lag, maar wend geen poging aan om Tyler verder in te nooi nie. 'Ons het verlede week teruggekom.'

'Sy het gesê sy wil vir julle kom kuier. Miskien sommer vanaand al.'

'Gaaf.' Meneer Dawson kyk aandagtig na Tyler. 'Jy lyk goed, Tyler. Jy is nou 'n afrigter, is ek reg?'

'Ja, Meneer. En dit gaan beter as wat ek gehoop het.' Tyler moet sy vraag vra. As hy nie spoedig op pad is nie, sal hy sy vlug mis. 'In elk geval, ek is hier omdat ek en Sami baie goeie vriende geword het.'

Die man lyk ongenaakbaar. Dis asof hy glad nie weet wat kom nie.

'Ons het dieselfde geloof, drome en doelwitte.' Tyler voel hoe sy handpalms begin sweet. Hy gaan waarskynlik die eerste man in die geskiedenis wees wat op hierdie stadium van ouers vra geweier word. Hy haal die gedagte doelbewus uit sy kop. 'In elk geval, ek wou u iets vra voordat ek vanoggend Arizona toe vlieg.'

Meneer Dawson knip sy oë. 'Wat wil jy vra, jong man?'

'Of ek met Sami mag trou. Ek wil dit graag doen, meneer Dawson.' Tyler voel skielik hoe vreugde in hom opbou, al weet hy nog nie wat die man gaan antwoord nie. Die blote uitspraak van die woord wil sy hart laat bars.

Tyler is nie seker wat Sami se oupa gaan doen nie. Hy staan 'n hele paar sekondes doodstil, asof hy geskok is, asof hy aan 'n manier dink om 'nee' te sê.

Maar toe verander sy uitdrukking, en sy oë word selfs 'n bietjie klam. 'Tyler.' Hy huiwer. 'Ek dink ek is jou 'n verskoning verskuldig.'

'Meneer?'

'Jy sien ...' Sy ken bewes en hy skud sy kop, op soek na woorde. 'Toe jy die eerste keer weg is van Samantha ... sy was nooit weer dieselfde nie.' Hy sit sy hand op Tyler se skouer. 'Ek het my voorgeneem dat jy nie weer haar hart gaan breek nie.' Hy glimlag skeef. 'Kan jy my dit belowe, Tyler? Dat jy nie weer haar hart sal breek nie?'

Tyler gee die man 'n drukkie, soos 'n seun en sy pa wanneer hulle mekaar na

'n lang tyd weer sien. 'Ja, Meneer. Ek belowe dit met alles wat ek is.'

Meneer Dawson tree terug en hierdie keer glimlag hy van oor tot oor. 'Wel, dan is my antwoord ja. Jy het ons toestemming.'

Sami se ouma kom aangestap. 'Wat gaan aan?' Sy is besig om haar hande aan 'n vadoek af te vee. Toe sy Tyler sien, gaan sy staan. 'Hallo, Tyler, is alles reg?'

'Ja, Mevrou.' Hy is een tree nader aan 'n troue met Sami. Die hele wêreld is reg. 'Ek het nou net u man se toestemming gevra om met Sami te trou.' Hy bly stil. 'Samantha.'

'En ek het ja gesê.' Meneer Dawson sit sy arm om sy vrou. 'Dit lyk asof ons bruilof gaan hou!'

Sami se ouma gee hom 'n drukkie. 'Ons is trots op jou, Tyler. Op die man wat jy geword het. Ek is seker Samantha sal baie gelukkig wees.'

'Het jy al gedink wanneer jy haar gaan vra?' Meneer Dawson vou sy arms.

'Gou. Sodra ek 'n paar idees kan uitdink.' Tyler glimlag. Hy was nog nooit so seker van enige iets nie. 'Ek is ook op pad na die lente-afrigtingsprogram toe. Maar sodra dit verby is.'

Hy groet en ry terug lughawe toe. Hulle sal nie baie geld hê nie, in elk geval nie aan die begin nie. Sy salaris by die Dodgers is maar op intreevlak. En Sami het nou pas by die jeugsentrum begin werk teen die helfte van die salaris wat sy by haar vorige firma gekry het. Maar dit maak nie saak nie.

Hy sien net sonskyn en geluk in sy toekoms.

Hy gaan vir Sami Dawson vra om met hom te trou.

Epilogue



Angel Town Meeting—Heaven

ORLON FELT THE SAME concern as everyone on his team. The mission had taken a very difficult turn. The baby who was supposed to be born in time might never be born. Their greatest goal was definitely in jeopardy. Like everything else good and true and right on earth.

The angels entered the room, their faces somber, serious. Usually at the end of an Angels Walking mission there would be cause to celebrate, reason to know they had succeeded.

Not this time.

When every angel was accounted for, Orlon moved to the front of the room. “I’d like Jag and Aspyr to join me.”

The Angels Walking team moved to their places beside him. “I want to make one thing clear.” Orlon’s voice was strong, resolute. “You did not fail this mission.”

Jag set his jaw, his face slightly raised. If any angel needed this talk, he did.

Orlon continued. “Jag . . . you and Aspyr were the perfect angels for this mission. Just as we all agreed before you left. You were given several tasks, and you succeeded in each one of them.” He ran through the list. “Most of all, you kept Marcus Dillinger alive and saw that his would-be killer was placed behind bars.”

Jag put his arm around Aspyr. The two of them looked down for a few seconds, as if they were remembering the intensity of their time on earth.

“I can’t remember a recent Angels Walking mission with so much danger, where so many lives were at stake.” Orlon looked at the other angels. “We watched and we prayed. And now we will give thanks to God for His miraculous intervention and for the success of the work done by Jag and Aspyr.”

This was one of Orlon’s favorite parts of being an angel. Listening to the applause break out through the room, the soft utterances of Jesus’ name and the praise meant to glorify God alone.

When the noise settled down, Orlon took a deep breath. “Any questions?”

An angel in the front row raised his hand. “Did you ever see Ryan Williams? The little boy you saved the last time you went on an Angels Walking mission?”

Orlon could tell by the look on Jag’s face that the meeting hadn’t occurred. He put his hand on Jag’s shoulder. “The boy is a police officer. Just out of the academy.”

Deep concern filled Jag’s eyes. “I . . . I didn’t know.”

“Yes.” Orlon looked to the angel who had asked the question. “Ryan may be a part of another mission. We’ll have to see.”

“I’d . . . like to watch when that happens.” Jag’s tone was proof that the long ago failed mission still stayed with him. “If that’s okay.”

“Definitely.”

Other questions came. Concerns about how Jag was able to control his anger. Orlon was curious about that, too.

“Very simply, I didn’t control it. I felt everything a human feels and in light of the little boy being shot, I wanted to kill. The desire ran through my veins.” Jag looked at Orlon. “I’m being honest.”

“We know.” Orlon was grateful for the way things had turned out. “The question was, how did you find control?”

“The name of Jesus. Lexy shouted Jesus’ name, and the anger left me. All in a rush. I belong to Him. I couldn’t think about acting on my own after that.”

Orlon felt a sense of pride over Jag’s actions. Many angels in the room would’ve struggled with the same challenge. It was another reason why it was so important to choose the right angels for each mission.

Angels Walking always came with risks.

This one more than most.

Jag and Aspyr were dismissed back to their places among the others.

The unknown ahead was their greatest problem now. Orlon faced the angels and straightened to his full height. “We must talk about what’s next.” He hesitated. “The main concern now is Mary Catherine.”

He let that sink in. “She will go to Africa, and she will get sick. The next stage of our mission will be nearly impossible. There will be very great heartache.” Michael had confirmed that much. Orlon looked at their faces. “You are heaven’s most prepared angels. Experts in matters of the heart. But we will need two very experienced angels next time around.”

The meeting was dismissed and Orlon spoke to Jag as he left the room. “I’m proud of you. I know how hard this mission was. There wasn’t an hour of rest.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jag ran his hand through his blond hair. “I just wish we

could've done something for Mary Catherine.”

Orlon smiled. “You did.”

“Sir?” Jag clearly didn't understand.

“You kept Marcus Dillinger alive.”

With that Jag smiled and headed after the other angels. When the room was empty, Orlon got down on the golden floor and lay his face to the cool stones. For the next hour he talked to the Father, begging for wisdom and direction.

If they failed the next mission, there would be no going forward.

All of heaven and earth would pay the price.

Naskrif

Engelevergadering in die hemel

~

O

Orlon deel die bekommernis van almal in die span. Die sending het baie moeilik geword. Die baba wat veronderstel is om gebore te word, gaan dalk nooit die lewenslig sien nie. Hulle belangrikste doelwit is beslis in gevaar. Soos alles wat goed en waar en reg op aarde is.

Die engele kom in met ernstige, somber gesigte. Aan die einde van 'n engelesending is daar gewoonlik redes vir feesviering, die gevoel van sukses.

Maar nie hierdie keer nie.

Toe al die engele daar is, beweeg Orlon na die voorkant van die vertrek. ‘Ek wil hê Jag en Aspyn moet by my kom staan.’

Die engele van die pas afgelope sending kom staan langs hom. ‘Ek wil een ding duidelik maak.’ Orlon se stem is sterk en vol oortuiging. ‘Jul sending was nie 'n mislukking nie.’

Jag byt op sy tande en kyk op. As daar ooit 'n engel was wat hierdie praatjie nodig gehad het, is dit hy.

Orlon gaan voort. ‘Jag, jy en Aspyn was presies die regte engele vir die sending. Soos ons almal saamgestem het, voordat julle weg is. Julle het verskeie opdragte gekry, en julle het elkeen suksesvol uitgevoer.’ Sy oë gly oor die lys in sy hande. ‘Julle het bowenal vir Marcus Dillinger aan die lewe gehou en toegesien dat sy aspirant-moordenaar agter tralies beland.’

Jag sit sy arm om Aspyn. Hulle kyk 'n paar sekondes lank af, asof hulle hul intense tyd op aarde onthou.

‘Ek kan nie aan ’n ander onlangse engelemissie op aarde dink waarby daar soveel gevaar betrokke was nie, en waar soveel lewens op die spel was nie.’ Orlon kyk na die ander engele. ‘Ons het gewaak en gebid. En nou sal ons God dank vir sy wonderwerkende ingryping en vir die sukses van die werk wat Jag en Aspyn gedoen het.’

Dit is een van Orlon se geliefkoosde take as engel. Om te hoor hoe die applous oral in die kamer losbreek, hoe Jesus se Naam sag geuiter en God geloof word.

Toe dit weer stil word, haal Orlon diep asem. ‘Is daar enige vrae?’

’n Engel in die voorste ry lig sy hand. ‘Het julle ooit vir Ryan Williams gesien? Die seuntjie wat jy op jou vorige missie gered het.’

Orlon kan aan Jag se gesig sien dat die ontmoeting nie plaasgevind het nie. Hy sit sy hand op Jag se skouer. ‘Die seun is ’n polisieman, pas klaar met sy opleiding.’

Jag se gesig is dadelik diep bekommerd. ‘Ek ... ek het nie geweet nie.’

‘Nee.’ Orlon kyk na die engel wat die vraag gevra het. ‘Ryan sal moontlik deel van ’n volgende missie wees. Ons sal moet sien.’

‘Ek ... sal graag wil sien as dit gebeur.’ Jag se stem wys dat daardie missie van lank gelede, toe hy misluk het, nog by hom spook. ‘As dit kan.’

‘Beslis.’

Daar is nog vrae. Vrae oor hoe Jag dit reggekry het om sy woede onder beheer te bring. Orlon wonder ook daaroor.

‘Wel, die eenvoudige antwoord is dat ek dit nie beheer het nie. Ek het die emosies gevoel wat ’n mens voel, en toe die klein seuntjie geskiet is, wou ek doodmaak. Ek kon dit voel.’ Jag kyk na Orlon. ‘Ek is eerlik daaroor.’

‘Ons weet.’ Orlon is dankbaar oor die uiteinde van die saak. ‘Die vraag is: hoe het jy dit reggekry om jou woede onder beheer te bring?’

‘Die Naam van Jesus. Lexy het sy Naam uitgeroep, en die woede het my verlaat. Ewe skielik. Ek behoort aan Hom. Ek kon dit daarna nie eens oorweeg om op my eie op te tree nie.’

Orlon voel trots op wat Jag reggekry het. Baie engele in die vertrek sou dieselfde stryd gehad het. Dit is waarom dit so belangrik is om die regte engele vir elke missie te kies.

Daar is altyd gevare wanneer engele op ’n missie is.

En tydens hierdie een was daar meer as gewoonlik.

Jag en Aspyn gaan sit weer tussen die ander engele.

Hul grootste probleem is nou die onbekende toekoms. Orlon kyk na die engele en strek hom tot sy volle lengte uit. ‘Ons moet praat oor wat volgende kom.’ Hy huiwer. ‘Ons grootste bekommernis is nou Mary Catherine.’

Hy laat dit insink. ‘Sy sal Afrika toe gaan en siek word. Die volgende stadium

van ons sending is bykans onmoontlik. Daar sal groot hartseer wees.’ Migael het dit bevestig. Orlon kyk weer na die engele. ‘Julle is die hemel se meesparate engele. Kenners van hartsake. Maar ons het twee baie ervare engele nodig vir die volgende missie.’

Orlon verdaag die vergadering en die engele gaan in groepies uit. Orlon keer Jag voor voordat hy die vertrek verlaat. ‘Ek is trots op jou. Ek weet hoe moeilik die missie vir jou was. Daar was nie ’n oomblik se blaaskans nie.’

‘Dankie, Meneer.’ Jag stoot sy hand deur sy blonde hare. ‘Ek wens net ons kon iets vir Mary Catherine gedoen het.’

Orlon glimlag. ‘Julle het.’

‘Meneer?’ Dis duidelik dat Jag nie verstaan nie.

‘Julle het Marcus Dillinger aan die lewe gehou.’

Jag glimlag toe hy agter die ander engele aan stap. Toe die vertrek leeg is, gaan Orlon met sy gesig op die koel klippe van die vloer lê. Vir ’n uur lank praat hy met die Vader, en smee Hom om wysheid en leiding.

As hul volgende sending misluk, is daar nie ’n tweede kans nie.

Die hemel en die aarde sal die prys betaal.

Dear Reader Friend,

I promised you this time around I’d share my own angel encounter. Like all interactions with angels, I can’t be sure I was really in the presence of a heavenly being. But I know this.

There’s no other way for me to explain what happened.

It was 2007 and I was headed to Atlanta, Georgia, for the International Christian Retail Show. That year my book *Even Now* was up for book of the year—the first time a novel had been nominated. Before I left, my mom and dad drove to my house—just to say goodbye.

My dad, Ted Kingsbury, was especially emotional. “I wish I could be there,” he told me. “I know you’re going to win.”

It was the same way with my dad ever since I was a little girl. He would read what I’d written and rave over it. From the time I was twelve he would tell me, “Someone has to be the next bestselling novelist, Karen . . . it might as well be you!”

All my life my dad believed in me, and that night before I left for Atlanta with my kids Kelsey and Tyler, my dad was convinced the big award would be mine.

The award show happened two nights later, and my dad’s prediction came true. *Even Now* was named book of the year. Back home my dad was so excited. He spent the next day talking to my mom and calling my husband,

Don. "We need to throw Karen a party," he told them. "Let's think of something."

But the party was not to be.

That afternoon my dad suffered a massive heart attack. One minute he was talking with my mom, and the next he was out. Laid back in his recliner like he'd fallen into a deep sleep.

My nephew Andrew was thirteen at the time. He was the first to think something was wrong. He called 911 and an operator talked him through giving my father CPR for the next fourteen minutes. Keep in mind my dad was very heavy and he wasn't on a flat surface. He was in a recliner.

By the time paramedics arrived, my dad was blue and unresponsive. Andrew ran into the next room and started sobbing. He thought he'd done something wrong. He believed his grandpa's death would be on his shoulders.

The house was chaotic, the paramedics working feverishly on my dad. Ten minutes became fifteen and there was talk of calling in the time of death.

Suddenly a police officer rushed into the house. He found my mother and pulled her aside in the next room. "Do you believe in Jesus?" he asked her.

"Yes!" she cried out. "Yes, we're believers."

With a peace-filled intensity, the man looked straight into my mom's eyes. "We're going to pray that God gives your husband life again." He pointed back to where young Andrew was still crying. "We're going to pray because otherwise that boy out there will spend the rest of his life thinking this was his fault."

And so the officer took hold of my mom's hands and he prayed. "Dear God, we ask that the power that raised Lazarus from the dead would breathe life into Ted Kingsbury this very minute. In Jesus' powerful name, amen."

The very second the officer said, "Amen," from the other room the head paramedic yelled, "We have a heartbeat!"

They were able to keep my dad alive all the way to the hospital, where he lived another six weeks in ICU. We had time to tell him everything we ever wanted to say. We laughed and remembered every wonderful memory and we prayed every possible prayer.

When he died, our family was at peace and so was my dad.

Later my mom tried to find the officer who randomly came into the house to pray with her that day. She called the police station and asked the paramedics. No one had ever heard of the man.

We came to believe that the officer was an angel, sent in response to so many prayers being cried out on behalf of my dad. An angel, maybe, on an Angels Walking mission.

Now you know why I allowed Jag to be a police officer.

Keep a lookout this fall for book three in the *Angels Walking* series. Mary Catherine, Marcus, Tyler, and Sami have so much ahead. The Wayne family, too.

Until next time, keep your eyes open. God is working all around us. Sometimes it's just a matter of looking.

In His light and love,
Karen Kingsbury

P.S. Connect with me on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#), @KarenKingsbury. If you found yourself changed while reading *Chasing Sunsets*, if you became closer to God or if you gave your life to Jesus for the first time, then drop me an email at Karen@KarenKingsbury.com. Write "Life Changed" in the subject line. If you do, I'd love to send you a Scripture letter I put together. Also, if you are unable to afford a Bible, and if you are unable to borrow one from your church or a family member, I will send you one. Simply write "Bible" in the subject line of your email.

Liewe leser

~

Ek het belowe dat ek hierdie keer van my eie engele-besoek sal vertel. Soos met alle ontmoetings die geval is, kan ek nie seker wees dat ek werklik in die teenwoordigheid van 'n hemelse wese was nie. Maar ek weet een ding.

Daar is geen ander manier om te verduidelik wat gebeur het nie.

Dit was in 2007 en ek was op pad na Atlanta om 'n internasionale Christelike boekfees by te woon. My boek *Even now* was genomineer as boek van die jaar – die eerste keer dat 'n roman genomineer is. Voordat ek vertrek het, het my ma en pa na my huis toe gekom om te groet.

My pa, Ted Kingsbury, was baie emosioneel. 'Ek wens ek kan daar wees,' het hy gesê. 'Ek weet jy gaan wen.'

Dit was hoe my pa nog altyd was, vandat ek 'n klein dogtertjie was. Hy was altyd opgewonde oor alles wat ek geskryf het. Van my twaalfde jaar af het hy gereeld gesê: 'Iemand moet die volgende topverkoperskrywer wees, Karen, en dit kan netsowel jy wees!'

My pa het my lewe lank in my geglo, en daardie aand voordat ek met my kinders Kelsey en Tyler weg is Atlanta toe, was my pa oortuig daarvan dat ek die toekenning sou kry.

Die toekenningsaand was twee dae later, en my pa se voorspelling het waar

geword. *Even now* is as boek van die jaar aangewys. My pa was baie opgewonde. Hy het die volgende dag daaraan gewy om met my ma en met my man, Don (per telefoon), daaroor te praat. 'Ons moet 'n groot partytjie vir Karen hou,' het hy gesê. 'Kom ons dink aan iets.'

Maar die partytjie het nooit plaasgevind nie.

My pa het daardie middag 'n massiewe hartaanval gehad. Hy het een oomblik nog met my ma gesels en die volgende oomblik was hy bewusteloos. Hy het in sy uitskopstoel gelê asof hy vas aan die slaap was.

My nefie Andrew was toe dertien. Hy was die eerste een wat besef het iets is verkeerd. Hy het 911 geskakel en die persoon het hom gehelp om vir die volgende veertien minute KPR op my pa toe te pas. Hou in gedagte dat my pa baie swaar was en nie plat gelê het nie, maar op sy uitskopstoel gesit het.

Toe die paramedici aankom, was my pa al blou en het hy geen reaksie getoon nie. Andrew het na die kamer langsaan gehardloop en begin huil. Hy het gedink hy het iets verkeerd gedoen en dat sy oupa se dood sy skuld was.

Die huis was chaoties en paramedici het koorsagtig met my pa gewerk. Tien minute het vyftien geword, en daar was al sprake daarvan om hom dood te verklaar.

Skielik het 'n polisieman by die huis ingekom. Hy het my ma eenkant toe geroep. 'Glo u in Jesus?' wou hy weet.

'Ja!' het sy uitgeroep. 'Ja, ons is gelowiges.'

Die man was vol vrede, maar baie ernstig toe hy in haar oë kyk en vir haar sê: 'Ons moet bid dat God jou man weer tot die lewe bring.' Hy het na Andrew gewys wat nog aan die huil was. 'Ons moet bid want anders sal daardie seun vir die res van sy lewe dink dit is alles sy skuld.'

Die polisieman het my ma se hande vasgehou en gebid. 'Liewe Here, ons vra dat die krag wat Lasarus uit die dood opgewek het, nou ook lewe in Ted Kingsbury sal blaas. In die kragtige Naam van Jesus, amen.'

En op die oomblik toe hy 'amen' sê, roep 'n paramedikus uit die kamer langsaan: 'Ons het 'n hartklop!'

Hulle kon my pa aan die lewe hou tot in die hospitaal, en daar het hy nog ses weke lank in die hoërsorg-eenheid bly leef. Ons het tyd gehad om vir hom te sê wat ons wou sê. Ons het gelag en elke mooi herinnering opgediep en dikwels saamgebid.

Toe hy sterf, was ons hele familie en ook my pa vol vrede.

My ma het later probeer om die polisieman wat by ons huis ingekom het en saam met haar gebid het, op te spoor. Sy het die polisiestasie gebel en die paramedici gevra. Niemand het iets van die man geweet nie.

Ons het toe begin glo dat die man 'n engel was, wat in reaksie op gebede van Atlanta tot in Los Angeles na ons toe gestuur is. 'n Engel wat miskien op 'n

engelesending was.

Nou weet jy waarom ek Jag 'n polisieman gemaak het.

Hou jou oë oop vir boek 3 van die Engelemissie-reeks. Daar lê veelbewoë dae voor vir Mary Catherine en Marcus, Tyler en Sami. En ook vir die Waynes.

En hou maar in elk geval jou oë oop. God werk onder ons. Partykeer moet jy dit net raaksien.

In sy lig en liefde

Karen Kingsbury

NS. Jy kan my op Facebook of Twitter by @KarenKingsbury kry. En as die boek jou lewe verander het, as jy nader aan God gegroei het of dalk jou lewe vir die eerste keer vir Jesus gegee het, kan jy gerus vir my 'n e-pos stuur by karen@KarenKingsbury.com. Ek sal graag vir jou 'n brief met Skrifgedeeltes wat ek saamgevoeg het, terugstuur. En as jy nie 'n Bybel kan bekostig nie, en as jy nie een by jou kerk kan kry nie, sal ek vir jou een stuur. Skryf net 'Bybel' in die onderwerpreël van jou e-pos.

Forever in Fiction



A SPECIAL THANKS TO Angie RHYNE, who won the Forever in Fiction item at my One Chance Foundation auction in 2012. Angie chose to name her mother, Sally Hudson, as a character in this book. Sally is small with beautiful blue eyes that long ago gave her the nickname “Blue-Eyed Sally.” She loves her family, including her husband, four children, and ten grandchildren. Her favorite vacations are the ones that take her back to Ohio to visit extended family. Sally loves reading and cooking—especially her annual “candy-making day” with her daughters and granddaughters. Beyond that, Sally found a faith in Jesus when she was first diagnosed with leukemia in 2001. She needed a bone marrow transplant, but no one in the family was a match, so Sally and her family prayed. A match was found and Sally received a lifesaving transplant. Years later she had the opportunity to meet her donor in what was an emotional reunion.

In *Chasing Sunsets*, Sally is a nurse at the doctor’s office where Mary Catherine is a patient. In the book, Sally’s story serves as an encouragement and allows Mary Catherine to believe that God is not finished with her just

yet.

The One Chance Foundation is an organization that grants money to people at the end stage of adopting. For more information, please check my website—KarenKingsbury.com.

Forever in fiction™

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B

esonder baie dankie aan Angie Rhyne wat die Forever in Fiction-prys gewen het by die 2012-veiling van my One Chance Foundation. Angie het besluit om haar ma, Sally Hudson, te kies as 'n karakter in hierdie boek. Sally is klein met pragtige blou oë, wat haar lank gelede die bynaam Blouoog-Sally besorg het. Sy is lief vir haar nabye familie, wat haar man, vier kinders en tien kleinkinders insluit. Sy hou van vakansies in Ohio waar sy die res van haar familie kan besoek. Sally hou van lees en kosmaak, veral van haar jaarlikse lekkergoeddag saam met haar dogters en kleindogters. Sally het tot geloof in Jesus gekom toe sy in 2001 met leukemie gediagnoseer is. Sy het 'n beenmurgoorplanting nodig gehad, maar niemand in haar familie was 'n geskikte skenker nie. Sy en haar familie het toe daaroor begin bid. 'n Geskikte skenker is gevind en Sally het die lewegewende beenmurgoorplanting gekry. Sy het jare later die geleentheid gehad om die skenker te ontmoet, en dit was 'n emosionele gebeurtenis.

Sally verskyn in hierdie boek as 'n verpleegster in die spreekkamer waar Mary Catherine allerhande toetse moet ondergaan. Haar verhaal dien dan as bemoediging vir Mary Catherine en help haar om te glo dat God nog nie met haar klaar is nie.

Die One Chance Foundation is 'n organisasie wat geld skenk aan mense in die finale stadium van aanneming. Jy kan meer inligting daarvoor op my webblad KarenKingsbury.com kry.

Reading Group Guide

Chasing Sunsets



KAREN KINGSBURY

Use these questions to go deeper into the story or to encourage discussion with your small groups.

1. Read Ephesians 6:12. According to this verse, what are our struggles against? Are they from this world? Explain.
2. Where did you most see the spiritual battle being waged while reading *Chasing Sunsets*?
3. Why was Jag concerned he was the wrong angel for this Angels Walking mission? What did you think about his past?
4. How can failing make us better equipped for today? Give an example from your life.
5. The term *chasing sunsets* is brought up early in the book by Marcus. What was that in reference to? Have you ever flown west and thought that you were chasing the sunset? What else could that term mean? Discuss it.
6. Have you ever considered the possibility that angels might fail? Discuss what happened to Jag in his Angels Walking mission a decade ago. Do you think the Bible supports such an idea? Why or why not?
7. Read Genesis 19:11. According to this Bible verse, is it possible one duty of an angel is to fight men? How did this play out in *Chasing Sunsets*? Is it comforting to imagine angels fighting on your behalf? Explain.
8. In your opinion, what was the most intense part of this Angels Walking mission? Can you think of an intense time in your life when things took a miraculous turn? Talk about it.
9. What do you think of the idea that not all people can see angels when they're on earth? Talk about an angelic encounter you or someone you know may have had.
10. Hosea 12:2–4 tells a story of man overcoming an angel. How do you think that could happen? Was Jag at risk of being defeated by Dwayne? Explain your thoughts.
11. Lexy had a very difficult life. Why do you think girls like Lexy are drawn to guys like Dwayne? Explain.
12. Do you know much about gang warfare? Are gangs a problem in your

area? Talk about that. What is your city doing to stop gang violence?

13. Talk about Marcus Dillinger. How did he feel after a shooting erupted outside his new youth center? Where was he finally able to find real meaning? Give examples.

14. Marcus was baptized at the beach. If you were baptized, talk about the experience. If not, talk about a special time at the beach. Why do you think we are drawn to the water?

15. The Wayne family has an open-door type of home, always welcoming people into their lives. Do you know anyone like that? What do families like that teach you? Why?

16. The Waynes also had a home church service every Sunday. Have you heard of house churches? What is your experience with church?

17. Early in the book, Mary Catherine learned that her heart was in trouble. At that point, she took a new position on ever falling in love. Explain how she felt. Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

18. Have you ever watched a documentary on the Scared Straight program? What are your thoughts about that type of tactic with at-risk kids? Talk about the Last Time In program. How was it different from a traditional Scared Straight program?

19. Do you agree with the idea of volunteers acting as advocates for at-risk kids? Share personal examples.

20. Mary Catherine talked often about moving to Africa. Have you ever dreamed of doing something like that? Share your stories.

Riglyne vir leesgroepe

~

Karen Kingsbury

Gebruik hierdie vrae om dieper in die storie te delf of om gesprekke in jou kleingroep aan te moedig.

1. Lees Efesiërs 6:12. Teen wie is ons stryd volgens hierdie gedeelte? Is hulle van hierdie wêreld? Verduidelik jou antwoord.
2. Waar was die geestelike stryd vir jou die duidelikste toe jy

die boek gelees het?

3. Waarom het Jag gedink dat hy moontlik die verkeerde engel was vir hierdie engelemissie? Wat het jy van sy verlede gedink?
4. Hoe kan mislukkings ons toerus vir die toekoms? Gee 'n voorbeeld uit jou eie lewe.
5. Marcus gebruik vroeg in die boek die uitdrukking 'die pot goud aan die einde van die reënboog'. Waarna verwys hy? Het jy al onder 'n reënboog deurgery en gewonder of jy die pot goud gaan kry? Wat beteken die uitdrukking? Bespreek die uitdrukking.
6. Het jy al daaraan gedink dat engele kan misluk? Bespreek Jag se ervaring op sy missie van 'n dekade gelede. Dink jy die Bybel bevestig hierdie gedagte? Motiveer jou antwoord.
7. Lees Genesis 19:10–13. Dink jy dat hierdie gedeelte aandui dat engele soms teen mense moet stry? Waar in die boek kon jy iets daarvan sien? Troos dit jou om te dink dat engele soms namens jou stry? Verduidelik jou antwoord.
8. Watter gedeelte van hierdie engelemissie was na jou mening die mees intense? Kan jy aan 'n intense periode in jou eie lewe dink toe dinge wonderbaarlik uitgedraai het? Bespreek dit.
9. Wat dink jy van die idee dat nie alle mense 'n engel wat op die aarde verskyn, kan sien nie? Vertel van 'n ontmoeting wat jy, of iemand wat jy ken met 'n engel gehad het.
10. Hosea 12:4–5 vertel die verhaal van 'n man wat 'n engel oorrompel. Hoe dink jy kan dit gebeur? Dink jy daar was 'n gevaar dat Dwayne vir Jag kon verslaan? Verduidelik jou gedagtes hieroor.
11. Lexy het 'n baie moeilike lewe gehad. Waarom dink jy voel meisies soos sy aangetrokke tot jong mans soos Dwayne? Verduidelik jou antwoord.
12. Weet jy iets van bende-oorloë? Is bendes 'n probleem in die gebied waar jy woon? Bespreek dit. Wat doen jou stad of dorp om bende-geweld hok te slaan?
13. Praat oor Marcus Dillinger. Hoe het hy gevoel na die skietery buite sy nuwe jeugsentrum? Waar het hy

uiteindelik sin en betekenis gevind? Gee voorbeelde.

14. Marcus word op die strand gedoop. Is jy al gedoop? Praat daaroor. As jy nog nie gedoop is nie, kan jy gesels oor 'n ander spesiale geleentheid op 'n strand. Waarom dink jy voel ons aangetrokke tot water?
15. Die Waynes het 'n oop huis en is altyd gereed om mense in hul lewens in te nooi. Ken jy so 'n gesin? Wat leer sulke gesinne jou? Waarom?
16. Die Waynes hou ook elke Sondag huiskerk. Wat weet jy van huiskerke? Wat is jou ervaring van kerkdienste en kerkbywoning?
17. Mary Catherine leer vroeg in die boek van haar hartprobleem. Sy besluit toe dat sy nie verlief gaan raak nie. Verduidelik haar gevoelens. Stem jy met haar saam? Waarom of waarom nie?
18. Het jy al 'n dokumentêr oor programme om jongmense uit tronke te hou, gesien? Wat dink jy van die soort programme wat in die boek beskryf word? Praat oor die Laaste Keer Inprogram. Hoe verskil dit van die Skrik wakker!-program?
19. Stem jy saam met die plan om vrywilligers as begeleiers met kwesbare kinders te laat saamwerk? Gee voorbeelde uit jou eie lewe of waarvan jy weet.
20. Mary Catherine het dikwels oor haar droom om na Afrika toe te gaan, gepraat. Het jy soortgelyke drome? Vertel jou verhaal.

Life-Changing Fiction™ by #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Karen Kingsbury

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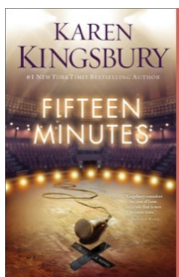
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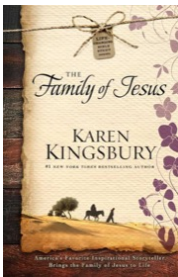
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#1 *New York Times* bestselling novelist Karen Kingsbury is America's favorite inspirational storyteller, with more than twenty-five million copies of her award-winning books in print. Her last dozen titles have topped bestseller charts and many of her novels are under development with Hallmark Films and as major motion pictures. Karen is also host of a national music-format radio program, "The Karen Kingsbury Show" where she tells stories between the songs. She lives in Tennessee with her husband Don and their five sons, three of whom are adopted from Haiti. Their actress daughter Kelsey lives nearby and is married to Christian recording artist Kyle Kupecky.

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